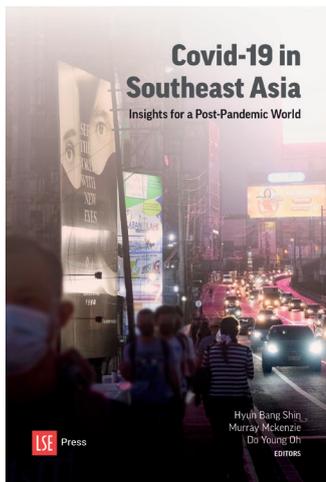


Part 3

PART III: COLLECTIVE ACTION, COMMUNITIES, AND MUTUAL AID

18. Rethinking urbanisation, development, and collective action in Indonesia <i>Rita Padawangi</i>	205
19. Community struggles and the challenges of solidarity in Myanmar <i>Ponpavi Sangsuradej</i>	218
20. Gotong royong and the role of community in Indonesia <i>Adrian Perkasa</i>	228
21. Rewriting food insecurity narratives in Singapore <i>Al Lim</i>	239
22. Happiness-sharing pantries and the ‘easing of hunger for the needy’ in Thailand <i>Thanapat Chatinakrob</i>	249
23. Being-in-common and food relief networks in Metro Manila, the Philippines <i>Tessa Maria Guazon</i>	257
24. Community responses to gendered issues in Malaysia <i>Tengku Nur Qistina</i>	272
25. Building rainbow community resilience among the queer community in Southeast Asia <i>Cornelius Hanung</i>	281
26. Postscript: in-pandemic academia, scholarly practices, and an ethics of care <i>Hyun Bang Shin, Yi Jin, Sin Yee Koh, Murray Mckenzie, Do Young Oh, and Yimin Zhao</i>	291



Hyun Bang Shin
Murray Mckenzie
Do Young Oh

Covid-19 in Southeast Asia

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**PART III:
COLLECTIVE ACTION, COMMUNITIES,
AND MUTUAL AID**

18. Rethinking urbanisation, development, and collective action in Indonesia

Rita Padawangi

The term ‘development’ on its own indicates progress towards becoming more advanced. In most of today’s urbanisation, however, the term ‘urban development’ has implied a capitalist mode of production in which planners consider capitalism the most rational way of managing and distributing space in everyone’s best interests (Stein 2019). As a result, many urban developments around the world have normalised social inequalities for the sake of economic efficiency in the profit-making scheme of spatial distribution. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, exposed social inequalities that had been ‘normalised’ in ‘normal’ times. For example, Singapore won worldwide praise for curbing infection levels in the first month of the pandemic, only to see it spike tremendously by the end of March 2020 (Kurohi 2020; Ng 2020). The initial measures missed migrant workers in dormitories; many were construction workers in Singapore, but their living quarters were segregated from most of the population. Once the virus reached the dormitories, dense living conditions made physical distancing difficult, and towards the end of June 2020 there were more than 40,000 COVID-19 cases among migrant workers in dormitories. There was also panic buying across supermarkets in the early days of the virus’s spread in Singapore (Chang 2020), an indication of perceived insecurity in a crisis.

Normalcy implies the status quo, which might include the social inequalities, discrimination, and even oppression that were taken for granted in everyday situations. In the context of capitalist urban development, the constant presumption of economic growth as the main indicator of development has normalised the relegation of other aspects of societal progress to lesser importance (Friedmann 1992). The ready association of gross national product (GNP) per capita with livelihood

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improvements has been applied almost universally throughout world economies despite the known shortcomings of using income as a measure of progress, as it neglects the human scale and social-environmental interconnectedness across borders. As a result, urbanisation around the world has continued to decrease space for various communities who become collateral to development, such as farmers, fisherfolk, and *adat* (traditional) societies. They are underappreciated when unquantifiable aspects of social-cultural life are converted into quantified economic valuation. Those who are collateral to development comprise everyone on the margins, including the urban poor, who have often been targets of forced evictions (Padawangi 2019a).

The domination of the capitalist urban development paradigm has had both ideological and pragmatic impacts. On the pragmatic side, development strategies have been in favour of the drive to urbanise. Singapore, for example, has achieved accelerated development since the 1960s through an economic restructuring that transformed an agricultural society into an industrial one. Agriculture was significantly reduced, as it contradicted the city-state's land-scarce development strategy. Singapore's position as the wealthiest city-state in Southeast Asia subsequently became a development model for the entire world. The desirability of this development model was further cemented by the global city's image as a cultural hub, formed through the construction of large-scale facilities for arts and culture, in connection with the city's function as an economic hub (Kong 2010; Yeoh 2005).

Yet, cities' economic superiority has relied on footprints beyond their territories, as cities have been dependent on the countryside for resources. Urbanisation has taken up fertile land, rice fields, and forests to extract natural resources through mining as well as building roads, airports, houses, condominiums, and new towns (Spinney 2020). Simultaneously, spaces in the city that attract more investment have often relied on crowding people in high density to maximise profit (Luscombe 2020). In the process, these developments have increased the likelihood of zoonosis and other infectious diseases and have also made urban spaces products to be traded in the market economy (Spinney 2020). Consequently, social inequalities have been apparent in spatial inequalities that limit livelihood improvement opportunities for marginalised groups and affect access to health services and environmental quality.

Activists and scholars have questioned 'normalcy' through the critical rethinking of urbanisation and have thus called for alternative

visions of it (Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer 2012; Cabannes, Douglass, and Padawangi 2019; Lefebvre 2003). They have called for increased attention to people's actions to change the city in order to change society (Castells 1983), to 'rethink the economy' by carefully analysing social relations rather than income per se (Friedmann 1992, p.44), and to look at the smallest units of society as social, political, and economic agents (Cabannes, Douglass, and Padawangi 2019). Looking beyond state interventions has been important to examine possible alternatives. In Southeast Asia, excluding Singapore, the state's limitations have been obvious in the mismatch between master plans and everyday realities. With these limits on state capacity, collective actions in civil society have yielded important social dynamics in Southeast Asia. After recent natural disasters, such as typhoons in the Philippines and earthquakes in Indonesia, local and transborder collective actions like aid deliveries and empowerment programmes have been particularly important.

How have collective actions from civil society members and groups responded to the pandemic? What have been their limitations? What could we learn from the dynamics of Southeast Asia's collective action in questioning normalcy in today's urban development? Collective action comprises 'purposive, meaningful, and potentially creative' ways to challenge political establishments (Chesters and Welsh 2011, p.5). Examinations into local efforts to 'counter the alienating forces of capitalist urban growth' (Cabannes, Douglass, and Padawangi 2019, p.16) have been of central importance in understanding how, why, and how far collective action could challenge presupposed notions of 'normal' urban development (Harvey 2020). In Southeast Asia, these collective responses have emerged through existing networks of civil society groups and citizens. From self-imposed area quarantines to food-sharing, crowdfunding, and collective farming, crisis-activated actions have effectively countered the market-driven production of urban space. In addressing the questions on the process of collective action responses, limitations, and connecting collective action with today's urban development, there are two important considerations: first, the perspective of the actors on the ground in social mobilisation during a crisis has been key to understanding the processes behind these responses, and, second, actions that aim to question normalcy and create lasting change require sustainability. These two considerations are elaborated below.

First, since actions on the ground have been of key importance, we need to look at neighbourhoods as a group of households that can make collective decisions on local spatial governance (Beard and

Figure 18.1. Gatekeepers at Kampung Akuarium, Jakarta

Source: Dharma Diani (2020).

Dasgupta 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic provided a window onto the collective abilities of neighbourhoods in making purposive decisions for the public good in the absence of authoritative government responses to protect public health. A case in point is Jakarta, where the pandemic's early months became a stage for political competition: national elites opposed measures by the local governor-cum-political rival at the expense of public health (Jaffrey 2020). Amid this situation, various neighbourhoods took action, from restricting movements through collective guarding to disinfecting public spaces. For example, a poor urban neighbourhood in north Jakarta, Kampung Akuarium, imposed movement restrictions as early as 9 March 2020, before the city implemented official restrictions. Subsequently, residents built a gate and assigned shifts to guard the checkpoint (Figure 18.1). Local initiatives to curb large gatherings and encourage public health measures like mask-wearing occurred in various neighbourhoods across Indonesia (Figure 18.2), showing how collective actions were geared towards protecting shared spaces.

Amid the popularity of the 'cities as engines of economic growth' paradigm (Colenbrander 2016), the pandemic was also a reminder of the importance of food security. In Indonesia, food production has very much been a part of many societies' traditional cultural practices, but capitalist urban development has reduced the space to do so. Traditional fisherfolk in Jakarta Bay, for instance, have been sidelined for real estate-driven reclamation projects (Padawangi 2019b). The fertile island of Java is

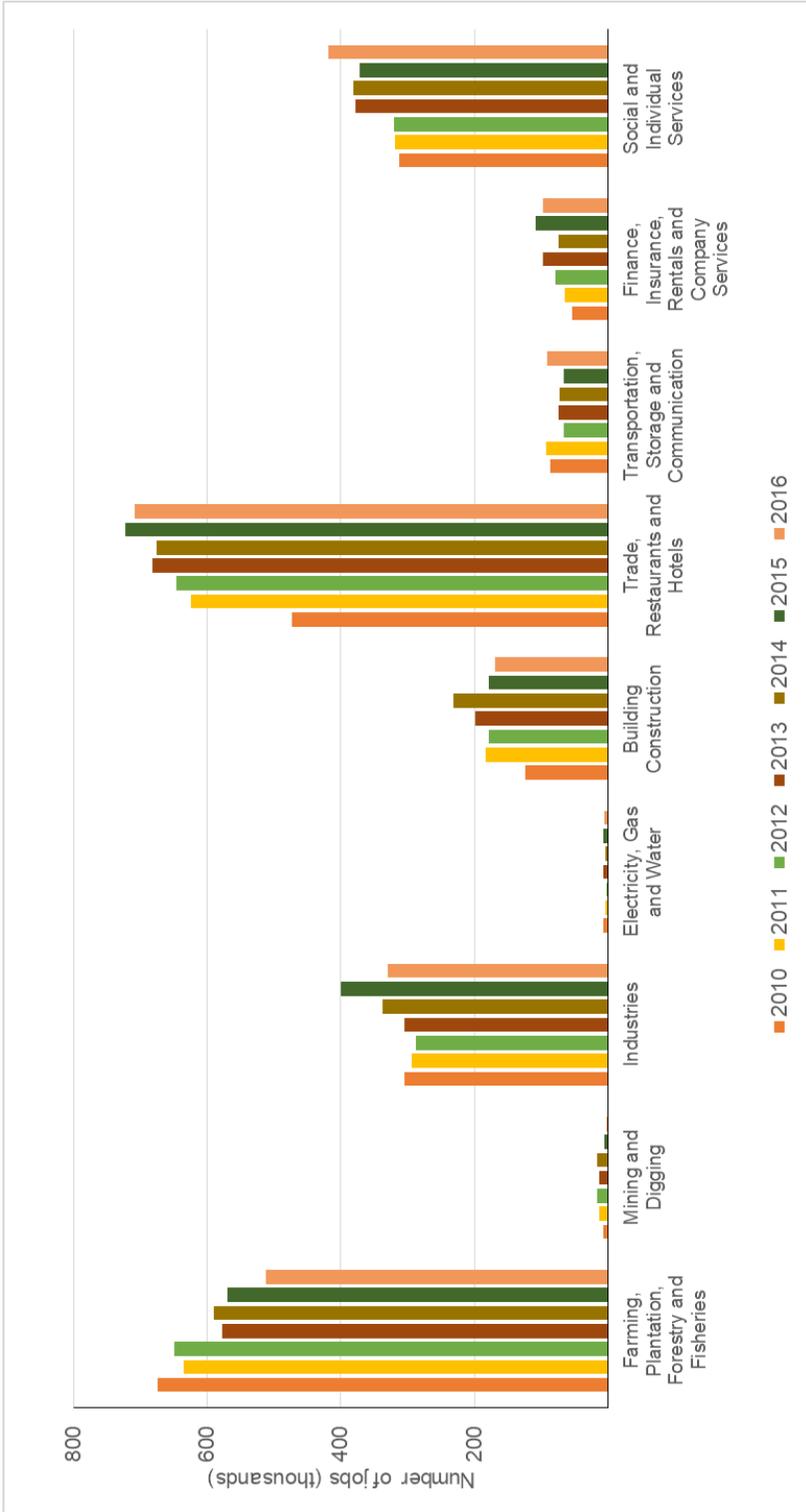
Figure 18.2. Mask mandate banner in Kampung Peneleh, Surabaya

Source: Muhamad Rohman Obet (2020).

also the most populated and most industrialised. Even in a place like Bali, where agriculture is still tied to everyday life, the share of agriculture in the province's economy has continued to decline, in contrast with the growing share of tourism-related trade and services (Figure 18.3). Global tourism that is 'good' for the economy has threatened the sustainability of *subak* – the thousand-year-old traditional water management system for irrigation – as agricultural land use has competed with tourism (Salamanca et al. 2015). Such dependency on global tourism became the economy's Achilles' heel during the pandemic.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that a popular collective action during the pandemic was the return to farming. A group of youths called Serikat Tani Kota Semarang (STKS), for example, started cultivating unused land on the fringes of the city during the pandemic. There were also groups of youths in Bali who went back to farming as the urbanised, touristified economy ground to a halt (Firdaus 2020; Muhajir and

Figure 18.3. Selected professions in Bali, 2010–2016



Source: BPS (2016, February data cycle); Graph published in Padawangi (2019b).

Figure 18.4. ‘Punk-Pangan’ – free vegetable distribution at WALHI, Denpasar



Source: Gilang Pratama (2020).

Suriyani 2020). The return to farming (and fishing) also corresponded with food-sharing initiatives; for example, Denpasar Kolektif (Denpasar Collective), a hardcore punk community, initiated ‘Punk-Pangan’ (Punks for Food) to regularly distribute free vegetables at the offices of Wahana Lingkungan Hidup (WALHI) (Figure 18.4). The distribution

of free vegetables also created space for greater advocacy against laws, projects, and practices considered harmful to the environment, such as the Benoa Bay reclamation and changes to the spatial planning, mining, and 2020 national omnibus ‘job creation’ laws. WALHI itself is an environmental NGO known for its advocacy activities for environmental issues in Indonesia; hence, the distribution of free vegetables at their offices, interspersed with handwritten advocacy posters on the table where they placed the vegetables, made the pandemic moment into a call for collective action to address wider environmental issues. In the case of STKS, the youths also developed training on the basic techniques of farming and food processing alongside classes on philosophical and sociological concepts that questioned capitalist development, including critical topics such as agrarian social movements, feminism, and ecology (STKS 2020).

These farming movements are examples of collective actions that were both pragmatic and political. By demonstrating society’s ability to continue functioning socially, economically, and culturally, they promoted a message of resilience. Compared to the panic buying of basic supplies in cities like Hong Kong, Singapore, and Jakarta at the start of the pandemic, this association between farming and resilience was situated in the pandemic as a critique of ‘cities as engines of economic growth’ as an unsustainable paradigm that exploits the countryside for resources (Tacoli 1998). In practice, these farmers’ collectives ranged from very pragmatic ones – choosing farming after being laid off from service jobs, for example – to ideologically purposive ones – challenging urban development trajectories and promoting ecological-environmental sustainability. Nevertheless, the promotion of resilience in farming as a form of collective action makes farming a ‘purposive, meaningful, and potentially creative’ way to challenge political establishments (Chesters and Welsh 2011, p.5), especially when they had regularly evicted farmers to develop infrastructure for urban economies.

Second, collective actions transcended beyond local neighbourhoods through peer-to-peer citizens’ networks. Where government interventions were lacking and corporations’ activities were slowed down, existing networks marshalled food resources from the countryside. Bursts of crowdfunding initiatives in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore during the pandemic constituted collective actions beyond their immediate spatial territories. It is, however, fair to question the sustainability of these initiatives. Nathalie Dagmang (2020), an activist in Manila, said:

It feels frustrating knowing that what we were doing was still inefficient and unsustainable. The government has all the resources, communication channels, control over transportation, and the personnel for checkpoints and local units. They are the ones mandated, by virtue of our votes and taxes, to provide for our needs during calamities such as this. But where are they now?

These initiatives highlighted the lack of state capacity in these countries, and the sustainability of citizens' collective actions depended on their ability to evolve into a structured societal alternative.

On the one hand, the pandemic provided a political opportunity for collective actions that advocated for societal change. Restrictions on physical spaces for gatherings intensified the use of technology as a public sphere. For instance, Kampung Akuarium in Jakarta continued their ongoing land reform process through online meetings with government officials. Protests and discussions occurred online, covering issues such as environmental sustainability, critical thoughts on urbanisation-as-usual, and the distribution of land and agrarian reform. Examples of these online actions included the 'People's Court' (*Sidang Rakyat*) on 1 June 2020, which was facilitated by the Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation to gather testimonies of witnesses from many parts of Indonesia to demand revocation of the new mining law. Online-offline alliances also opened up possibilities to connect distant geographies to build solidarity, such as the crowdfunding initiative to buy rice from cement factory-threatened farmers in Central Java for the urban poor in Jakarta.

On the other hand, overreliance on the online sphere might perpetuate larger social inequalities in access to technology. Furthermore, there were signs of pandemic-induced shrinkage of civic spaces following restrictions on public gatherings, cuts in funding for democracy and human rights advocacy, movement restrictions, and further limitations on freedom of speech (Gomez and Ramcharan 2020). Restrictions in the name of preventing the virus's spread might have also functioned as tools of repression. As the pandemic lingered, citizens' attitudes shouldered the blame. The 'new normal' emerged as a popular term to represent living with the virus as a given reality while minimising its spread. However, the term carries urban-biased assumptions. The eagerness to practise the 'new normal', largely defined by hygiene practices and regulations on social distancing, reduced the role of citizens in pandemic alleviation to merely abiding by the rules. Such a 'new normal', while logically correlated to curbing the spread of the virus, reduced the

problem to citizens' attitudes rather than questioning the larger problem of inequality in 'normal' urban development trajectories. While there have been legitimate questions on how citizens' lack of discipline worsened the pandemic, seeing the persistence of the pandemic solely as a problem of discipline increases the appeal of authoritarianism. Celebrating the achievements of countries that took more authoritarian approaches to containing the pandemic weakened the political opportunity to advocate for alternative societal structures and urban development paradigms. COVID-19 thus called into question 'the ability of the democratic model to cope with devastating events' (Belin and De Maio 2020, p.1).

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how collective action could provide alternatives to 'normal' urbanisation through action on the ground, activating networks, and intensifying the use of an online public sphere. These collective actions highlighted alternatives to the 'normal' supply chain, the 'normal' competitive economy, and the 'normal' obsession with skyscrapers and buildings. The ability to collectively act and function autonomously in the local context – socially, economically, and culturally – allowed citizens to continue thriving during a crisis. These actions largely consisted of simple gestures in social relationships, care for the environment, and making economies relevant to the everyday life of the land. The sustainability of these alternatives, however, was also affected by the availability of space, resources, and time. With governments and economic powers actively promoting 'new normal' narratives, existing social inequalities and environmental issues could remain unresolved, potentially affecting spaces for collective actions that need to continue evolving to sustain their momentum.

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19. Community struggles and the challenges of solidarity in Myanmar

Ponpavi Sangsuradej

Myanmar is not unfamiliar with disaster. The country was hit in 2008 by Cyclone Nargis, which led to 90,000 confirmed deaths and US\$10 billion in damage (Hurricanes: Science and Society 2015). Defying the military government's resistance to local and international aid, self-organised Burmese citizens rallied to support residents of the heavily flooded Irrawaddy Delta (Adams 2009). In 2020, Myanmar's elected government oversaw the country's official response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the self-mobilisation of communities remained prominent. While the Myanmar government framed its efforts against the disease as demonstrating and inspiring national solidarity, many of its responses failed to account for the pervasive social and economic divisions within the country. This chapter primarily covers COVID-19 prevention efforts in Myanmar from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic until September 2020, with some comment on the military coup that began on 1 February 2021 and as of April 2021 was still ongoing. The chapter explores state and community-based responses, including the Myanmar government's uneven and politicised pandemic relief, challenges of urban civil society efforts in informal settlements, and community-level initiatives in rural areas. I argue that community-level responses to the COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted Myanmar's existing socio-economic divides and ethnic conflicts.

A divided nation

After its independence from Britain in 1948, Myanmar was plagued by decades of civil war between ethnic minorities and the Myanmar army (Tatmadaw), which took control of the state in a 1962 coup. This authoritarian rule resulted in further ethnic conflict and economic

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mismanagement that continued to hinder the country's progress. Although the country saw its first freely elected government in 2015, poverty remained an important issue for Myanmar. The World Bank reported that, in 2017, the poor population in rural areas was 6.7 times higher in absolute terms than in urban areas, where economic development was more prevalent (World Bank 2019). The poorest families lived in the ethnic minority Chin State, suggesting a geographical correlation between poverty and the ongoing ethnic conflicts (World Bank 2019).

Economic and social development projects have been concentrated in urban areas such as the Mandalay and Yangon regions. Urban poverty, however, has remained a concern. For example, Yangon's informal settlements contained as many as 400,000 people, or 8% of the region's population (UN-Habitat 2020a, p.5). The socio-economic divides both within urban areas and between urban and rural settlements were evident in various official and community-based responses to the COVID-19 crisis, thus posing a real challenge to the already-divided nation.

While the general election in November 2020 saw a landslide for the civilian National League for Democracy, Myanmar fell into one of its darkest periods when the military staged a coup on 1 February 2021 and arrested dissidents, politicians, and citizens alike. To oppose the military takeover, people took to the streets as part of a nationwide civil disobedience movement. More than 103,000 government health workers went on strike and joined the movement (*Frontier Myanmar* 2021a). It was undeniable that health workers' strikes hindered the COVID-19 pandemic response, but a common protest refrain was that 'the military is more dangerous than COVID-19' (*Frontier Myanmar* 2021b).

State inefficiency amid public health crisis

Back in March 2020, though Myanmar had only seen five positive COVID-19 cases, the pandemic caused heightened alarm among citizens. With factories closed and lockdown impending, tens of thousands of Burmese migrants were returning from Thailand and Malaysia. The Myanmar government, however, was not ready to cope with such a large number of returnees. Myanmar citizens were alarmed by inconsistent state quarantine procedures. With migrants confused, many of them resisted quarantine enforcement, crossing the Thailand–Myanmar border undocumented or fleeing from the buses before reaching Yangon's Aung Mingalar bus station to avoid checkpoints and mandatory quarantine

(Ye Mon, Hein Thar, and Eaint Thet Su 2020). News channels displayed chaotic scenes of migrants trying to catch taxis and mingling in crowds. Inconsistent enforcement of quarantine exacerbated the anxiety. For example, 2,000 returnees were reportedly restricted to a quarantine facility, while the next day many thousands of newcomers were let go without having to go through the same procedure (Ye Mon, Hein Thar, and Eaint Thet Su 2020). Moreover, different rules and measures were introduced in different regions and states. By 23 March 2020, at least 215 out of Myanmar's 54 million people had tested positive, but COVID-19 testing was only available to those who had symptoms, which worried citizens because of asymptomatic cases (Leong 2020). Questions such as 'who will have to go through state quarantine?', 'why did some get away?', and 'who will get tested?' were whispered. Lack of resources meant insufficient staff and testing kits at border checkpoints (Ye Mon, Hein Thar, and Eaint Thet Su 2020).

The macroeconomic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic in Myanmar heavily affected the country's households (ADB 2020). From April to May 2020, the Asia Foundation surveyed 750 businesses, which had reportedly laid off 16% of their workforces (Asia Foundation 2020, p.13). Moreover, the government's new social distancing regulations put a burden on vulnerable members of society. The construction industry was heavily hit by the crisis. The government imposed new restrictions of 50 people per construction site, a significant decrease from 1,000 workers during pre-COVID-19 times (Rhoads et al. 2020). This resulted in a huge drop in the employment of day labourers.

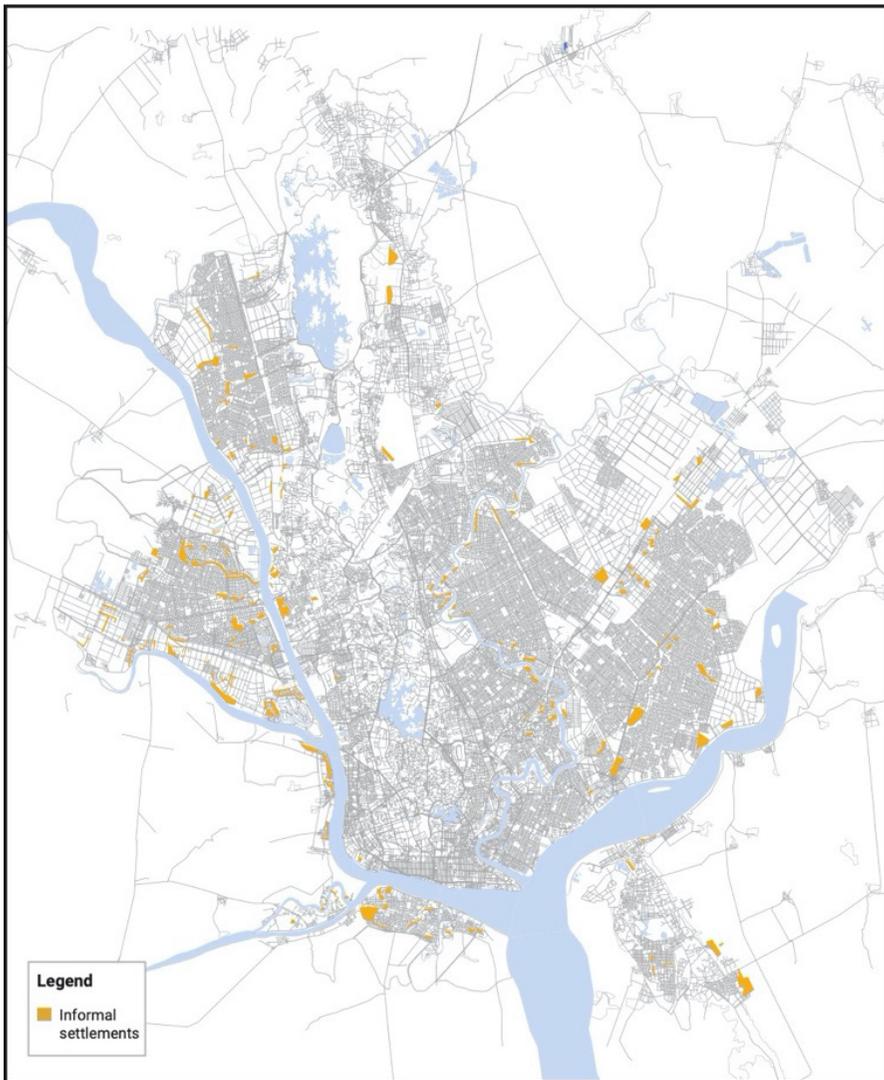
One of the main challenges was Myanmar's informal economy. Its large unbanked population became a problem for the government's COVID-19 fund and Economic Relief Plan (CERP), which was aiming for a resilient recovery through tax relief, credit for businesses, and food and cash for households. The CERP received criticism for its non-inclusiveness and inflexible spending targets (World Bank 2020). Two immediate relief efforts targeted vulnerable families: a special handout of five basic commodities (rice, cooking oil, salt, onions, and beans) in April 2020, and a two instalment cash payment of 40,000 Myanmar kyat (around £22) in July and August 2020 (Htin Lynn Aung 2020). The eligibility criteria, however, were very narrow: a whole family would be excluded if any member owned land or was registered as having formal employment. In Myanmar's traditional households, several generations live together. Owing to these criteria, the entire family would miss out on the government's cash assistance if even one family member was ineligible (Rhoads 2020). These measures deepened the

vulnerabilities of those already most affected by the economic impacts of the pandemic.

Self-mobilisation in urban areas and challenges on informal settlements

There were various reactions to the government's calls for public cooperation in the fight against the pandemic. The Myanmar government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was shaped by its long-term aim of national unity. In contrast to ongoing and historical conflicts among the government, the military, and the wider population, the pandemic presented an invisible and external common enemy that threatened the physical body of the nation and its individuals. Mask-wearing in Myanmar was seen not just as a matter of self-protection but as a demonstration of a commitment to protect others. A sense of solidarity also pushed many civil society organisations to initiate community-based responses to facilitate state-led projects, e.g. assisting government staff in food distribution. Other efforts included food donations by local charities, student blood donation drives, and hotel owners providing free stays to healthcare personnel (Rhoads et al. 2020). This solidarity also manifested in initiatives aimed at addressing the perceived gaps in the government's response. In April 2020, the charity group People to People distributed basic goods to 2,660 trishaw drivers across Yangon who had lost their income during lockdown (Eaint Thet Su 2020). Other charity groups provided assistance, including funeral services and a free 24/7 ambulance service. These types of community efforts were widely publicised on social media. For example, a story of Myanmar citizens donating their electricity subsidy to aid the state's coronavirus fight was widely shared on social media (Kyaw Phyto Tha 2020). However, such solidarity efforts, while popular among urban dwellers who lived in relatively more affluent areas, did not engage with or attempt to address the socio-economic problems that necessitated these campaigns in the first place.

The scale of informal settlements in Yangon posed a challenge to tackling transmission. As reported in 2020, 400,000 people or 8% of Yangon's population lived in 423 informal settlements across the city (UN-Habitat Myanmar 2020a, p.5; see Figure 19.1). These communities had been living under threat of eviction since 2018. Moreover, as more than 70% of informal settlers were not registered on any housing record, the pandemic was a threat to their livelihood, income, and tenure. Relief efforts by the state and NGOs were hindered by a lack of

Figure 19.1. Map of informal settlements in Yangon

Source: UN-HABITAT Myanmar (2020a).

Note: Informal settlement areas are shown shaded orange.

data on the ground (UN-Habitat Myanmar 2020b, p.6). Moreover, according to a survey of the impact of the pandemic on informal settlements, 81% of the surveyed households had at least one member who had lost their job in the preceding 30 days and 94% reported a decrease in household income (UN-Habitat Myanmar 2020b, p.12). In addition to lost income, the lockdown hindered communal projects that would have been of help during these times. For example, residents of urban

savings groups used to meet daily before the pandemic to deposit savings, which enabled them to save a small amount for recurring costs such as electricity, rent, and food. Some groups even collected savings for community development projects such as sewage works (Rhoads et al. 2020). The ban on assembly, however, prevented regular community gatherings that used to bring together 10 or 20 people (Rhoads 2020).

Civil society actions were key to the prevention of COVID-19 in more disadvantaged areas, especially informal settlements. Community efforts in informal settlements underlined the existing inadequacy of government functions in the community. Local civil society organisations and self-organised *parahita* (voluntary sector) groups used their local knowledge and contacts to act as leading responders. The *parahita* groups provided training and tools to prevent the spread of coronavirus (Rhoads et al. 2020). They also coordinated with local and state governments to distribute food to those who did not meet the criteria for state aid. They distributed water and masks, sprayed disinfectants, and organised waste collection (Rhoads et al. 2020). According to UN-Habitat's survey (2020, p.4), half of the surveyed households feared eviction. As many residents lost their jobs in the informal sector, they decided to take loans for day-to-day expenses.

With an imminent fear of eviction by the government, several informal settlers' groups attempted to prove their worth as 'good citizens' and contribute to national solidarity. The Bawa Pann Daing business group from the informal settlement of Dagon Seikkan township started making masks in response to a shortage thereof (Liu 2020). Comprising 15 women, the self-sufficient venture produced 6,000 hand-sewn cotton masks. The group donated around 5,000 to the community and 800 to the local government. Often seen as society's outcasts, the group's members hoped that their contribution would alleviate the threat of eviction (Liu 2020).

Experiences in rural areas

In contrast to the campaigns by civil society in urban areas, community actions in rural areas were often driven by distrust towards a government that community members felt was neglecting them. The inconsistent quarantine measures mentioned earlier confused not only domestic travellers but also locals. Different states and regions introduced varying rules: quarantine ranged from zero to 21 days in state facilities. Some even required a health certificate for travellers (Ye Mon 2020). Lacking or distrusting official guidance, many villages organised their

own informal checkpoints and mandated quarantine procedures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and ensure their safety. West of the Yangon region, the Phya Tha Dike village tract¹ administrator and village elders decided among themselves to set up a school as a quarantine facility – similar measures were adopted in many areas across the country. The villagers felt it was a crucial step, as people in rural areas were already struggling to access healthcare services (Kyaw Ye Lynn, Ye Mon, and Naw Betty Han 2020). The Phya Tha Dike village had only one qualified healthcare worker, a midwife, and not enough tools and staff if an outbreak were to occur (Kyaw Ye Lynn, Ye Mon, and Naw Betty Han 2020).

Antagonistic feelings rose, especially towards migrants seen as bringing a disease from abroad (Lotha 2020). Many returnees from big cities like Yangon also faced stigmatisation and were forced to quarantine in community facilities far from their villages despite an order from the government that allowed domestic travellers to quarantine in a private home (Pollock and Aung Thet Paing 2020, p.2). Attitudes such as ‘we don’t know who’s infected and who’s not’ caused fear and rifts in the community, as rumours were spread of returnees ignoring quarantine altogether (Lawi Weng 2020). It was hard to check who followed home quarantine in Burmese households, as private rooms were not always available (Pollock and Aung Thet Paing 2020, p.2).

Even though the villages took inspiration from state quarantine guidelines, there was no guarantee of a consistent standard. In Mon State, more than 36 township facilities operated largely on community initiatives (Kyaw Ye Lynn, Ye Mon, and Naw Betty Han 2020). Some smaller Mon townships, however, later shut down their own community-level quarantine centres and relegated returnees to a more centralised facility in town (Lawi Weng 2020). Throughout this continuous confusion, the state government was not involved (Lawi Weng 2020). These local facilities were initiated by local civil society organisations that donated money for medical supplies and human resources to carry out the project. For example, a volunteer group formed in February 2020 ran a community quarantine facility in Mon State’s Ye township at their own initiative (Kyaw Ye Lynn, Ye Mon, and Naw Betty Han 2020). In April 2020, the government ordered that all quarantine schemes organised by wards and villages would need the approval of the regional committee, but this was met with resistance from locals (Kyaw Ye Lynn, Ye Mon, and Naw Betty Han 2020). Although local practices might not have followed government rules, many communities preferred breaking the law to sacrificing their own safety.

Conclusion

Community responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Myanmar highlighted existing social and economic divides that had long been mis-handled by the government. Positive responses seemed to come mainly from relatively affluent urban dwellers, while marginalised informal settlements, densely populated with low hygiene standards and scattered throughout the city, persisted. Dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic should have been an opportunity for the state to realign its view of these communities as being part of society rather than forgotten outcasts.

Community reactions to the central policies of regional and ward quarantine reflected wider political, economic, and ethnic divides and mistrust between the central government and the states. In 2020, Myanmar's governments continued their crackdown on critics, just as was done after 2008's Cyclone Nargis (Adams 2009). Even the democratically elected NLD government attempted to assert broad control over local organisations and threatened the livelihoods of many, especially ethnic minorities across the country. For example, anti-government statements were banned in Kayah State (Zue Zue 2020). Aung San Suu Kyi's aspirations of national solidarity were an illusion for many, as the government continued its oppression, attempting both to eradicate the disease and to stifle criticism of its response.

During the first months of the pandemic, Burmese citizens' reactions to state pandemic policies indicated wider political fractures and mistrust towards the authorities. The violent military coup of February 2021 then obliterated any chance to mend these divides. As of April 2021, nationwide protests and mass civil disobedience were continuing, and over 750 civilian deaths had been reported (*Reuters* 2021). The military's brutal actions utterly severed any link between communities and the state, leaving the fate of the entire nation uncertain.

Note

1. A village tract is the lowest subdivision of the Myanmar government administrative structure.

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20. Gotong royong and the role of community in Indonesia

Adrian Perkasa

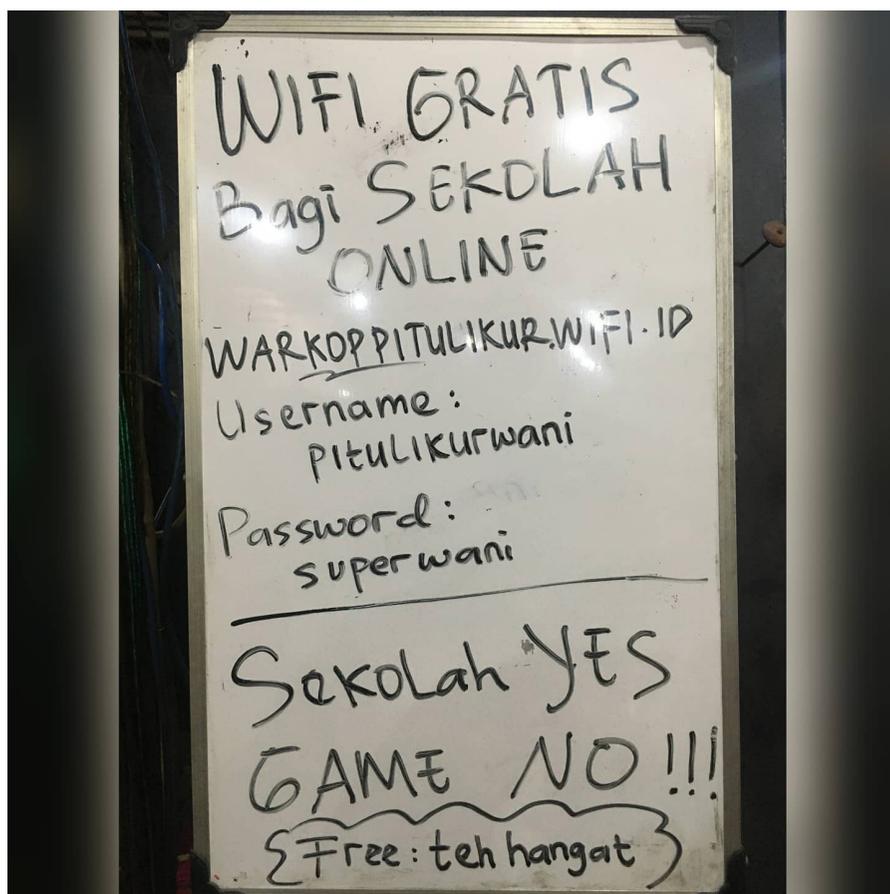
‘We are tired with DraSu, all we need is *gotong royong!*’ This statement came from Husin Ghozali, alias Cak Conk, who was the owner of Warung Kopi (coffee shop or *warkop*) Pitu Likur in Surabaya, Indonesia. His coffee shop went viral in social media in the last week of July 2020, or the beginning of the new school year in Indonesia. The Indonesian government decided to conduct online learning, or School from Home (SFH), in all levels of education, from elementary to high school, owing to the COVID-19 outbreak. However, many students’ parents were unhappy with this decision, especially in many households in the *kampung*s (neighbourhoods) of Surabaya. They felt it brought more difficulties to their families, who were already struggling very hard to cope with the new situation. Then, Cak Conk initiated a plan to help many students in his *kampung*. He invited students to use the Wi-Fi in his coffee shop during SFH (see Figure 20.1). Not only free access to the internet; he also provided a glass of tea or milk for the students who spent their school day there.

Unfortunately, the municipal government of Surabaya complained about Cak Conk’s initiative. An official from the *Dinas Pendidikan* (Education Agency) of Surabaya warned students to avoid public spaces such as his *warkop* to prevent increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases. In line with this complaint, several members of the Surabaya Parliament also criticised the *warkop*. They urged the students to stay at home as regulated previously by the government. According to them, Surabaya’s municipality would provide free internet in several public spaces in the neighbourhood, such as *Balai RW* (the neighbourhood hall). However, by mid-August 2020, this plan had remained on paper (Kholisdinuka 2020). Moreover, the students still came to Warkop Pitu

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Figure 20.1. Free Wi-Fi for online schooling ... Free: a cup of tea



Source: Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

Likur every morning to attend school online. Cak Conk explained to me on the phone at the end of July:

Actually, I don't have any intention to promote my business. I only heard many parents of my son's friends in the school face difficulties in providing internet for their children. Thus, I just quickly responded by open [sic] my *warkop* for them.

According to him, *kampung* people were tired of the failure of the government to minimise the pandemic's effects on their everyday lives (interview, 26 July 2020). Surabaya, the second biggest city in Indonesia and the capital of East Java province, had become the epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak in this province. Moreover, this situation was

worsening because of the bitter relationship between the mayor of Surabaya, Tri Rismaharini, and the governor of East Java, Khofifah Indar Parawansa. Many people in Surabaya, including Cak Conk, had a particular term referring to this relation: *Drama Surabaya* (Surabaya Drama) or *DraSu*.

This term was derived from *Drama Korea* (Korean Drama/K-Drama) or *DraKor*, which had recently become popular in many parts of the world. The first publicly acrimonious dispute between the two figures was over the planning of Surabaya to limit the mobility of people entering the city. The governor refused this plan because, according to her, large-scale social restrictions had been implemented under the authority of the regional and national governments. A few weeks later, they became involved in hostilities again after Tri Rismaharini told the media that the increasing COVID-19 cases in Surabaya were because many new patients in Surabaya hospitals had come from other towns in East Java. The two of them were engaged in conflict over two mobile polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test labs, which had been loaned from the Badan Penanggulangan Bencana Nasional (National Mitigation Disaster Agency) (Syambudi 2020). In early August 2020, the governor denied the mayor's claim of a decreasing number of COVID-19 cases in Surabaya.

The political rivalry between these two leaders also affected the pandemic's management, especially in hospitals and other healthcare facilities. According to Donny,¹ a doctor at Surabaya's Dr Soetomo Hospital, many difficulties emerged in handling the COVID-19 pandemic because of that rivalry (interview, 26 July 2020). The first and foremost problem, according to him, was that there was a lack of coordination between healthcare facilities managed by the municipality of Surabaya and those managed by the province of East Java. Dr Soetomo Hospital was the COVID-19 referral centre in the Surabaya region operated by the province of East Java. As soon as the COVID-19 outbreak began in Surabaya, many new patients sent directly to this hospital from Surabaya's healthcare facilities bypassed national and regional handling procedures for COVID-19. As a result, the hospital became an epicentre for the virus's spread. The spokesman for Surabaya's disease task force publicly stated several times, however, that the situation in Surabaya was under control (Widianto and Beo da Costa 2020a).

The Ikatan Dokter Indonesia (Indonesian Medical Association) admitted that healthcare workers had felt overwhelmed by the high number of patients and increasing workloads due to the government's

pernicious management. Arguably, the world's highest rate of deaths of healthcare workers was in Indonesia (Barker, Walden, and Souisa 2020). Many medics in Surabaya were reportedly infected by the virus. 'It's like a vicious cycle, and the one blames another party and vice versa. The municipal and provincial governments should work together to protect their people. We need *gotong royong*,' Donny stressed to me. Again, there was another person who emphasised the importance of *gotong royong*, loosely translatable as 'communal or neighbourly help', to deal with the pandemic.

People practise *gotong royong* in everyday life and communal activities, from family celebrations such as weddings or engagements to the celebration of religious feasts and national days. It is also not uncommon for *kampung* people in urban areas like Surabaya to still practise *gotong royong*. The case of Cak Conk and his *warkop* has been the best example of how *gotong royong* has been relevant during the pandemic. In previous studies, scholars such as Bowen (1986), Guinness (1986), and Sullivan (1986) have argued that *gotong royong* is a construction from the state, rather than originally embedded in the Indonesian community. Even though this kind of mutual assistance reflects genuine indigenous notions of moral obligations and generalised reciprocity, it has been argued that it has been reworked by the state to become a cultural-ideological instrument for the mobilisation of village labour (Bowen 1986, pp.545–546). Suwignyo (2019, p.407) traced the initial concept of *gotong royong* to the Dutch colonial period and its further development under Japanese occupation and in post-independence Indonesia. According to his research, every government from the 1940s to the 1990s promoted *gotong royong* extensively as a signifier of collective identity. He concluded that *gotong royong* became a form of social engineering and an ingenious linguistic strategy by which elites orchestrated control over citizenship-making.

Nevertheless, the aspirations of Cak Conk and Doctor Donny in Surabaya seemingly contradicted such scholarly arguments. Rather than the state promoting *gotong royong*, the people were urging their government to act with *gotong royong* when facing troubled times during the pandemic. Or, can it be said that Cak Conk's initiative for *gotong royong* was only a particular case or even an exceptional phenomenon?

A recent survey by LaporCOVID-19 and the Social Resilience Lab at Nanyang Technological University showed that the majority of people in Surabaya tended to underestimate the risk of being infected by coronavirus. The economic and social situations also had a significant

impact on the lesser perception of risk (LaporCOVID-19 2020). Thus, the *kampung* people who worked as daily labourers or ran a small *warung* like Cak Conk contributed heavily to this lesser perception of risk. Another scholar in Surabaya, Windhu Purnomo, also stressed the similar argument that most of the people in Surabaya only prioritised their economic interests in the traditional market and public spaces (Larasati 2020). These arguments were in line with the state perspective that often blamed people as a main cause of the high number of COVID-19 cases in Surabaya (Meilisa 2020).

To get a broader picture and understand the situation in Surabaya, I am turning my attention to look at bottom-up responses from other *kampungs*. Despite many limitations during this time, I tried to conduct fieldwork in online environments. I interviewed several *kampung* residents in Surabaya whom I had known before, including Cak Conk and Doctor Donny, via WhatsApp video calls. The first *kampung* I decided to scrutinise was Kampung Peneleh (see Figures 20.2 and 20.3). I have had a long and intensive relationship with the residents of this *kampung* for more than a decade. I have also been working as a local principal investigator for the Southeast Asian Neighbourhood Network (SEANNET) in Kampung Peneleh. I worked with several residents of Kampung Peneleh – including Obet, who assisted me with writing field notes from March to August 2020.

In the early period of the outbreak, the *kampung* situation seemed to confirm the results of the LaporCOVID-19 survey. There was a disagreement within the *kampung* in the adoption of new health protocols. A group of youths in a neighbourhood association promoted new hygienic attitudes by spraying disinfectant gas throughout the *kampung* and surrounding areas. However, not everyone, including several elders in the *kampung*, agreed with their initiative. The situation quickly escalated to a physical conflict between a youth neighbourhood association and other groups in the *kampung*. Eventually, after several heads of Rukun Tetangga (RT; the Neighbourhood Associations) mediated, the conflict subsided.

Perhaps one can quickly assess that the above situation displayed how many groups in the community resisted new health protocols. Nevertheless, the root of the dispute within Kampung Peneleh was not about resistance to health protocols after an outbreak. The first and foremost reason why many groups in Kampung Peneleh rejected the plan of fogging or spraying disinfectant was because this activity was fully sponsored by a political candidate who would be running in a mayoral election at the end of the year. This candidate was promoted

Figure 20.2. An entrance to Kampung Peneleh with notification banners to obey health protocols



Source: Image taken by Obet on 13 May 2020. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

by the coalition of political parties who opposed the incumbent mayor from Surabaya. However, the heads of RT in Kampung Peneleh decided only to follow official protocols from the government.

Figure 20.3. Eid prayer in Kampung Peneleh during the pandemic



Source: Image taken by Obet on 31 July 2020. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

Indeed, there was further resistance to obey new health protocols in Kampung Peneleh. Several *kyai* (Islamic leaders) and *ustadz* (Islamic teachers) refused a health protocol that requested the closure of the mosque until further notice. According to them, it was heretical to fear

the threat of a virus; all Muslims should only fear God. Moreover, the situation became more difficult because the first request from the government coincided with Ramadan, a month full of fasting and praying for Muslims. There is a significant and historical mosque in Kampung Peneleh called Masjid Jamik (Grand Mosque). Before the COVID-19 outbreak, this place was a centre of religious activities during Ramadan not only for people in Kampung Peneleh but also for people from surrounding neighbourhoods. As a consequence, the *kyai* and *ustadz* declined the request of the official health protocols. They were still doing many activities as they usually did in Ramadan before the pandemic.

Later there was a circular letter dated 3 April 2020 from the Nahdlatul Ulama, the biggest Islamic organisation in Indonesia, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. They issued a decision to slow the spread of coronavirus by avoiding any activities of meeting and gathering of Muslims in large numbers. It called for the implementation of worship during Ramadan, usually done together with the congregation in mosques or other praying halls, to be held at home. Other activities relating to the celebration of the Eid al-Fitr feast after Ramadan were also to defer to the provisions and policies of social restrictions and maintaining physical distance as determined by the government's official health protocols (Surat Edaran PB Nahdlatul Ulama 2020). Likewise, Muhammadiyah, another prominent Islamic organisation in Indonesia, had released a similar statement several days earlier (Surat Edaran PP Muhammadiyah 2020). Although these instructions were not directly implemented in Peneleh, the *kyai* and *ustadz* gradually started following it. Moreover, these figures also participated in promoting the government's instruction for people to stay at home for Eid al-Fitr and not going back to their respective regions or *mudik*. They did it through *gotong royong* with other *kampung* residences, including those who professed other religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Confucianism.²

Another case came from Kampung Pabean, where the biggest traditional market in Surabaya is located. As expected by previously mentioned scholars like Windhu Purnomo, indeed, many daily workers in that market were not obeying health protocols. However, it was only a slice of reality in the market and the *kampung*, and it was incomplete. Sahib, who was living in this *kampung* and was also a caretaker of the neighbourhood association there, told me another story. Together with the association, he always reminded everyone in the market and the neighbourhood to follow health protocols. In addition, they provided daily workers in the market with a free mask every day. Furthermore,

the neighbourhood association of Kampung Pabean was taking care of the poor people who became infected by the virus and were required to self-quarantine at home. They voluntarily supplied provisions to them during the quarantine: Sahib thus argued that ‘we should *gotong royong* to take care of ourselves’ (interview, 27 July 2020).

Conclusions

There were many bottom-up initiatives led by the people of Surabaya’s *kampungs*, but they have been neglected by most scholars. Instead of endorsing these people’s initiatives, some scholars have only painted the same picture as the state – a perspective that has seen people’s lack of awareness as the leading cause of the increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases in Surabaya. People like Cak Conk and the residents of Kampung Peneleh and Kampung Pabean have effectively incorporated the concept of *gotong royong* as a strategy to face the pandemic. They have urged and challenge the government, especially the municipality of Surabaya and the East Java provincial government, to set aside political enmity and use *gotong royong* to prevent further adverse effects from COVID-19.

As Springer (2020, p.114) has stated, in this challenging moment, people can gather, depending not upon the state and the command of any authority but on their collectivity. As one could see in the people’s *gotong royong*, collectivity was vital not only during this time but also for their future as urban dwellers and Indonesian citizens. However, Indonesia’s crisis went from bad to worse. Indonesia failed to bring the pandemic under control after March 2020: as of December 2020, there were 563,680 confirmed cases and 17,479 confirmed fatalities, plus another nearly 70,000 suspected cases. It has had by far the most extensive caseload and death toll in Southeast Asia, and the data showed that at the time of writing the situation was intensifying (Widianto and Beo da Costa 2020b). Following Harari’s (2020) argument, today’s civilisation faces an acute crisis, not only because of coronavirus but also because of the lack of trust among humans. People must trust science, and citizens need to trust public authorities. In addition to that, the state should show that its citizens can trust them. As with scientists, citizens, and public officials, trust and good faith prevail when people can rely on each other to uphold their commitments. Instead of requiring obedience, public authorities can appeal to common goals so that everyone can appreciate the needs that underlie a pledge or policy.

Notes

1. I have changed the names of all informants except Cak Conk and his *warkop*.
2. Indonesia's Ministry of Religion recognised Confucianism as one of six official religions in Indonesia.

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21. Rewriting food insecurity narratives in Singapore

Al Lim

For many, the phenomenon of food insecurity can be reduced to a fundamental fear: what happens if I run out of food? People were made acutely aware of this fear at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, when supermarkets began to run out of essentials. In Singapore, I propose that this fear was rooted in the narrative of scarcity and accelerated by the pandemic's crisis rhetoric. It extended a scarcity narrative developed since Singapore's independence, being an island nation cut off from Malaysia that had to survive with limited resources. Concurrently, this built on the neo-Malthusian logic seen in the Green Revolution of food scarcity as the main framing of the problem of hunger, instead of malnutrition and interconnected social issues. This way, the narrative obfuscated a more important statistic – 10.4% of Singapore's population was still food insecure in 2020 (Nagpaul, Sidhu, and Chen 2020).¹

This chapter reframes Singapore's narrative of food insecurity away from a misapplied scarcity and securitisation lens, instead connecting food insecurity to the lived experience thereof. Engaging this challenge paves the way for key discussions about how food insecurity is not isolated but intersects with consumption and malnutrition through axes of inequality such as class, gender, climate, and race. Solely increasing food production has not been nor will be the solution to eradicating hunger, especially without attention to its wider social processes. This has vital implications for the current national strategy of ramping up food production and diversifying food sources. In the wake of the pandemic, it has become even more vital to consider the heterogeneity of Singapore's social body to ensure future foodscape policy decisions do not reproduce existing inequalities.

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Constructing the strategic myth of food insecurity

Food insecurity is not food scarcity. Eradicating scarcity or having excessive food supply does not mean that there is no food insecurity, as many may not receive food due to distribution channels, accessibility, or other confounding factors. So, why has this connection between insecurity and scarcity been constructed or accepted in Singapore? One way to account for this is that the scarcity narrative has been built on two powerful logics: the historical trope of Singapore's scarcity thinking since its inception and the neo-Malthusian, Green Revolution rationale.

Scarcity is ingrained in Singapore's ideology. The dominant narrative of scarcity and survival can be traced to modern Singapore's origins (Sadasivan 2014). It is common knowledge in Singapore that the country began as a resource-scarce island that separated from Malaysia in the 1960s and, through a miraculous transformation, became a contemporary economic powerhouse. Part of this involved the state-invoked strategy of militarisation to ensure political tranquillity through perceptions of crises since the country's independence (Chong and Chan 2017, p.367; Tan 2001). The narrative legitimated drastic measures that the state needed to take, especially against those that might have seemed to come against it. Furthermore, crises stoke national sentiments. Consider how a government and population must do whatever it takes to ensure its success in an existential battle. Through the repeated invocation and naturalisation of scarcity-premised crises, this logic has remained dominant in contemporary Singaporean imaginaries.

To be sure, Singapore is a small island city-state and its resource scarcity cannot be wholly dismissed, but what must be explored further is whether the scarcity narrative is still appropriate. Singapore's position as a global city and top-ranked smart city, and its stellar economic profile, has placed the country in a radically different place from the 1960s. The repeated strategy of invoking crises and the rationale of not having any natural resources has simplified a far more complex reality, a process that has served to enhance the state's political position. However, the use of the scarcity narrative in contemporary Singapore has faltered because it no longer stands for a corresponding reality, as the city does not face the same 'scarcity' that it did 60 years ago.

Singapore's historical penchant for scarcity blends with the neo-Malthusian, Green Revolution narrative of scarcity, food production, and demographic constraints. Thomas Malthus (1798) is known for his theory that the geometric-ratio (exponential) increase of the

population would far exceed the arithmetic-ratio (linear) increase of food production, resulting in catastrophe when population outstrips food supply. The Malthusian link between population and food scarcity has been leveraged by proponents of the Green Revolution, claiming triumph over hunger and population woes through increased agricultural productivity. This connection was clearly stated when Norman Borlaug (1970) invoked the ‘Population Monster’ in his Nobel lecture, saying that the Green Revolution had only temporarily stemmed the tide against problems of human reproduction, where the scarcity of resource use remained the ultimate enemy.

However, the link between scarcity and hunger has been socially constructed and tenuous. As Amartya Sen (1983, p.8) has written, the ‘mesmerizing simplicity of focusing on the ratio of food to population has persistently played an obscuring role over centuries’. The empirical evidence supports this and exposes the failures of this logic. While food production increased after the Green Revolution’s implementation of ‘miracle wheat’ from its initial phases in Mexico in the 1950s, the number of hungry people increased by more than 11% in the decades of the Green Revolution’s major advances (excluding China as an anomaly) (Rosset, Collins, and Lapp 2000). This finding questioned the success of the Green Revolution and challenged how increasing food supply and capacities do not necessarily reduce the problem of hunger and malnutrition. Moreover, critics of the Green Revolution have pointed out that it was a set of misguided technologies forced on developing nations – a form of American cultural imperialism – that disrupted rural patterns, cultivated patterns of dependency for seeds and chemicals, and caused largescale environmental degradation (Beeman and Pritchard 2001). While the Green Revolution has ended, its legacy has far from disappeared (Patel 2013). The notion of not having enough (food scarcity) during COVID-19 powerfully evoked and legitimated the need for increased food production, which has been the case for Singapore, despite little empirical support for the connection between food scarcity and hunger.

The two narratives of scarcity from Singapore’s inception and the Green Revolution have combined to produce a strategic myth. This myth was not originally unfounded owing to strategic actions against material and resource constraints. Nevertheless, its continued usage has misapplied the logic of scarcity. The myth – an invocation of present-day food scarcity as food insecurity – no longer conformed to the reality of pandemic-era Singapore or the actions that it has legitimated,

such as the heavy focus on agricultural innovation. In other words, the scarcity rationale from the post-independence narrative did not fit its contemporary Singaporean context, and resulting actions of increasing technological production must be critically reconsidered.

‘Security’ and COVID-19 as catalysts

The securitisation discourse and effects from the COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the urgency of food scarcity, amplifying this strategic myth. As a catalyst for this narrative, the ‘security’ aspect sharpened the need for apparent food production or diversifying food sources to address scarcity. The framing of securitisation relied on the construction of an external enemy, using the logic of survival, urgency, and defence as a necessary response to danger or risk (Sahu 2019). This enabled the actors responsible to undertake whatever means necessary to fight the problem. In other words, the discursive focus on external food security relied upon, as security expert Naraghi-Anderlini (2020) has claimed, the belief that the deities of national security can never be questioned.

Ample evidence for securitising food security premised on addressing scarcity can be found in public discourse and reportage of COVID-19 and food insecurity in Singapore. It was imperative to ‘secure a supply of safe food for Singapore’, according to the Singapore Food Agency (2019). This was reinforced by Minister of Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing (2020) expressing how Singapore should not ‘comprise our ability to secure such supplies from other sources by revealing our national stockpile’. Historically, Singapore had been ‘*buttressing*’ its food security for decades (Ng 2020), and it had now become ‘every individual’s fight’ to maintain it (Tan 2020). The discursive repetition of securitised terms like ‘security’, ‘fighting’, ‘*buttressing*’, and ‘stockpiling’ framed Singapore’s need to secure its food supply using military terminology. They became part of the country’s naturalised and necessary discursive response to the pandemic.

The rhetoric of securitisation, along with uncertainty in the time of COVID-19, complemented a set of strategic acts by the government. The Singaporean state adopted numerous measures to assuage public fears, such as Minister of Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing posting pictures of 300,000 eggs arriving in March 2020. This emphasised the resilience of stockpiling strategies by national supermarket NTUC FairPrice, which avoided volatile price fluctuations and shortages. To further clarify what went on at the start of the pandemic, the state published an article that claimed that Singapore’s food supply was

never really at any risk and that it was an inter-agency effort between the Singapore Food Agency, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, Enterprise Singapore, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ensure agri-trade was maintained through diverse and resilient mechanisms (Government of Singapore 2020). These public announcements complemented the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore's (2013) food security roadmap, which primarily focused on diversifying sources of imports, investing abroad, developing industry, producing locally, and stockpiling. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an acceleration and expansion of these long-term plans for securitisation, as the state narrative remained resolute in its defence against food scarcity through a security modality.

What about lived food insecurities?

What the strategic myth and scarcity narratives missed was how food insecurity is a lived experience of hunger and malnutrition. It has been apparent that inequality exists in Singapore (Teo 2017a). Specifically, inequality in domestic food consumption and security existed prior to COVID-19. Based on the definition of food security in the World Food Summit (1996), all people at all times should have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious foods to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.² This was the working definition that the nationally representative survey of the Lien Centre for Social Innovation (LCSI) used, and the results indicated that 10.4% of Singaporean and permanent resident (PR) households had been severely (3.5%) or moderately (6.9%) food insecure in the previous 12 months (Nagpaul, Sidhu, and Chen 2020).

These statistics were pre-pandemic, and COVID-19 undoubtedly worsened them. Many of those who were food insecure lived in one- or two-room flats, and only 22% of food-insecure households were seeking support, due to social stigmatisation (Nagpaul, Sidhu, and Chen 2020). The pandemic's effects of lockdowns, economic and financial precarity, cabin fever, and compounding stresses increased the intensity and number of households facing food insecurity. Little representative data was available on the long-drawn-out effects of the pandemic, though social isolation served to reinforce the very boundaries preventing food-insecure households from reaching out in the first place. Therefore, the domestic portrayal of food insecurity, where not all people have access to adequate food at all times, was rendered less visible by the strategic myth of scarcity.

The lived experience of food insecurity has also been fundamentally a question of health. Adverse health outcomes due to food insecurity have long been documented, affecting cognitive performance and being linked to higher risks of depression, anxiety, and cardiovascular risks such as hypertension and diabetes (Gundersen and Ziliak 2015; Seligman, Laraia, and Kushel 2011). The reduction in the comprehensive dietary requirements of food insecurity added to existing physical and mental health burdens from the pandemic.

These health tolls have also been unevenly distributed throughout the population along lines of inequality. The strategic myth has homogenised the population as benefiting wholesale from improved food production but has done little to unpack the disadvantages and other myths along axial intersections such as class and the climate disaster, as well as citizenship, gender, and race (Dutta 2015; Teo 2017a; Teo 2017b).

A new narrative of food insecurity

As a direct response to COVID-19, food production capacities ramped up, with urban farms becoming popular in the country. The increase in productive capacities was part of efforts to increase the domestic production of Singapore's nutritional needs from 10% to 30% by 2030 (Teng 2020). This goal, along with the state's diversification strategies, was driven by the notion of scarcity and running out of food. To write against the strategic myth of food-insecurity-as-scarcity became an important endeavour, raising the critical question of: food security for whom?

Singapore does not need another Green Revolution and more scarcity thinking; food insecurity is not a simple, technocratic fix of production and supply. Addressing the problem of food insecurity must simultaneously account for its interconnected social processes, distribution channels, and the people consuming the food. Distributive channels and the 'who' can be illuminated by connecting it to community initiatives such as Eat for Good, Food from the Heart, and Foodbank's Feed the City. They continued to alleviate food insecurity during the lockdown and provided for families in need while supporting local businesses, and they should help to shape directions for addressing national food insecurity as vital stakeholders.

Better health and well-being outcomes for citizens during and beyond COVID-19 are at stake. The pandemic thus played an expository role, bringing into sharp relief and exacerbating social inequalities like extant food security, as well as powerful ideologies like the scarcity

narrative that undergird policy decisions. Considering the impact of the scarcity narrative, what narratives can Singapore rewrite? Indeed, with the series of wicked problems currently facing the island nation, what narratives *must* Singapore rewrite? For example, what happens if there is a shift from scarcity to frugality? Both acknowledge resource limits. Where the former evokes anxiety around the possibility of running out of resources, implying the need to securitise, the latter generates less anxiety while still maintaining the need for a more circumspect management of resources. This way, Singapore can mitigate the reproduction of mistakes that technology-as-salvation and neo-Malthusianism have wrought while creating more equitable foodways. Moreover, this chapter posits that being the ‘top’ in the world does not mean being free of problems, and other cities can undertake similar exercises to reflect on their own strategic myths, extant social inequalities, and the series of wider processes that the pandemic painfully exposed. Thus, to challenge inherited myths is also to enact more caring and careful modes of policymaking.

Notes

1. The statistic was released in a nationally representative survey by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation (LCSI) in August 2020, uncovering the hidden pockets of food insecurity in what the Economist Intelligence Unit (2019) had ranked as the most food-secure country in the world.

2 Compare this definition with how the Economist Intelligence Unit’s (2019) ranked Singapore top in food security. The latter’s three evaluative measures – affordability, availability, and quality and safety – are external components that pay little attention to the lived experiences of food insecurity. These indicators measure how resistant Singapore’s food supply chain is to shocks, whether consumers have a wide variety of food to purchase at stable prices, and if the nutritional quality and safety of food are relatively high. The measures are determined by external factors such as economic tariffs, the amount invested in research and development, and the diversification of foods. While important, the definition can be integrated with a more expansive understanding of food security using the World Food Summit’s definition.

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22. Happiness-sharing pantries and the ‘easing of hunger for the needy’ in Thailand

Thanapat Chatinakrob

The COVID-19 pandemic directly affected the Thai economy and its growth projections, as Thailand was one of the first countries with cases (WHO 2020). The Thai economy, which relied on global trade, shrank by at least 5% in 2020 (World Bank 2020, p.4; USDA Foreign Agricultural Service 2020, pp.2–6). From March 2020, the service sector also faced a sharp decline in tourism and other related industries, such as transportation, accommodation, and food service activities. It accounted for approximately 15% of GDP (World Bank 2020, pp.8–11). Household welfare was likely to be more severely affected by the pandemic. The number of households living below US\$5.50 per day doubled, from 4.7 million in the first quarter of 2020 to an estimated 9.7 million in the second quarter of 2020 (World Bank 2020, pp.26–28). The Thai government came up with strategic preparedness and response plans (WHO 2020, pp.1–3) to tackle the pandemic and provide compensation for its people, but they were not adequate. Fortunately, several community-based initiatives arose as a bottom-up approach in challenging the pandemic. A key part of these stories in Thailand was a campaign called ‘happiness-sharing pantries’.

This chapter introduces community-led food-sharing initiatives in response to COVID-19 in Thailand through the happiness-sharing pantries campaign. It also analyses the operation and the effectiveness of this campaign, which was run by charities and local communities in Thailand. It is believed that the campaign not only contributed to the well-being of the needy during the pandemic but also revealed problems with social welfare structures and the social protection system in the country.

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The happiness-sharing pantries campaign

In March 2020, the happiness-sharing pantries campaign was introduced by the local community in Bangkok (Little Brick Group 2020). It began with the simple idea that people in the community could share food, daily necessities, or even medicines with those who needed them. The pantry used in this campaign was a common pantry or cupboard that almost every house in Thailand already had. The work of happiness-sharing pantries was also uncomplicated. Community members would place donations in a roadside cupboard, and people who were in need would take an appropriate amount of what they needed. It was suggested that people who obtained food would feel happy and people who donated them would feel the same (Thai News Service Group 2020).

It started from only five model pantries located at different places in Bangkok. This campaign aimed to alleviate the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. At first, people believed that this campaign would not work, as the social structure of Thailand differs from other countries (Little Brick Group 2020). There was also a survey conducted by the Little Brick Group (2020) showing that no one would put free food in the pantries. Two weeks after the beginning of the campaign, however, the pantries were still in their original places and thus received substantial attention (Thai News Service Group 2020). The pantries were widely accepted and then increased in number throughout Thailand. Government agencies responded positively to the campaign and placed additional cupboards at the entrances of their offices (Thai News Service Group 2020). Temples, police stations, military camps, hospitals, local markets, and some supermarkets also joined the campaign (Thai News Service Group 2020). At the end of 2020, every province in Thailand had pantries, with most in urban areas and smaller numbers in rural provinces. There were more than 300 official pantries in Bangkok, more than 100 official pantries in Phuket, and more than 50 official pantries in Chonburi (Pattaya), with the total number of official pantries reaching more than 1,400 (Little Brick Group 2020). Table 22.1 lists the approximate number of pantries in each province of Thailand.

Why did the happiness-sharing pantries campaign work in Thailand? At least three key players contributed to this campaign: charities, local communities, and the government. No official source confirmed where the happiness-sharing pantries campaign originated, but one of the most likely sources was a group of 20 people named ‘Happiness-Sharing

Table 22.1. The approximate number of happiness-sharing pantries in each province of Thailand, as at 30 December 2020

Region	Number of happiness-sharing pantries
Central (including Bangkok)	692
Northern	157
North-eastern	142
Eastern	130
Western	68
Southern	283
Total	1,472

Source: Happiness-Sharing Pantries by Little Brick Group (2020).

Pantries by the Little Brick Group’, which was inspired by the ‘Little Free Pantry’ launched by Jessica McClard in the United States (Little Brick Group 2020). The Little Brick Group first installed five model pantries at different places in Bangkok. Even though the types and characteristics of the pantries had no formal standard, they had to resist heat and rain. They also required, if possible, a cover to prevent bugs or other animals from getting inside, as well as an accompanying sign that specified their purpose (Little Brick Group 2020). The pantries also needed to be noticeable and placed at accessible locations such as markets, public transportation stops, government service offices, and any other easily reachable community spaces.

The campaign was genuinely a local, bottom-up initiative. At the very first stage, the campaign was initiated by local communities; no government agency contributed to it. Every pantry nationwide was a locally based initiative. Local communities maintained this campaign by promoting feelings of shared ownership (Little Brick Group 2020). Even though each pantry technically belonged to a person in the community and someone had to be responsible for its installation, communities tried to build a consensus that everyone was an owner of the pantry, thus promoting a sense of shared ownership (Little Brick Group 2020). Feelings of shared ownership, sometimes called a sense of community ownership, require the participation of local communities in making decisions at every stage of the process (Bowen 2005, pp.78–86; Lachapelle 2008, pp.53–55). The feeling of shared ownership of happiness-sharing pantries in Thai local communities was promoted in the same way (Gingerella 2020; Thai News Service Group 2020): it became

a community event to take part in caring for the pantry, including filling up and taking out the right amount of food.

Setting up any instalments along the roadside in Thailand, however, needs official permission from the local authorities. Any pantry donor had to ask for permission from the relevant local authority in order to abide by the law, namely Section 39 of the Act on the Maintenance of the Cleanliness and Orderliness of the Country, B.E. 2535 (1992). This Act made it mandatory to request permission for any actions that might affect public places, such as installing a happiness-sharing pantry. Submitting such a request drew the attention of local authorities, especially police officers. They recognised the existence of the pantries, however, and even supported the regularity and orderliness of the pantries (Thai News Service Group 2020). For example, many central administration offices – such as the Ministry of Culture and the Department of Rural Roads – and provincial administration offices – such as the provincial governor of Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya, Chiang Mai Administration, Chachoengsao City Municipality, and Phetchabun Local Administrative Office – joined the campaign by installing pantries in their own areas.

After the Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration of Thailand (CCSA) announced the easing of Phase 5 restrictions from 1 July 2020 (National News Bureau of Thailand 2020), most business operations reopened, and the pantry scheme seemed to become less of a priority. People rarely donated food, and some pantries were abandoned. A civil society organisation called the PunSook (Happiness-Sharing) Society, however, was formed to coordinate and sustain the campaign (PunSook Society 2020). This permanent organisation was also supported by many governmental and non-governmental agencies, including the Digital Economy Promotion Agency, the Federation of Thai Industries, the State Railway of Thailand, the Transport Co., Ltd., and the Board of Trade of Thailand (PunSook Society 2020). Therefore, the PunSook Society could sustainably act as an agent between donors and the needy in the post-COVID-19 era.

The COVID-19 situation in Thailand seemed to be under control between July and December 2020, with no new cases. There were new clusters, however, after outbreaks in several provinces, including Samut Sakhon, Rayong, and Chonburi, in late December 2020 and April 2021. This resurgence of new clusters led to the reintroduction of the happiness-sharing pantries campaign to local communities in Thailand.

Social impacts

Whether there was a COVID-19 outbreak or not, the existence of happiness-sharing pantries for the distribution of foods to the needy could decrease economic and social disparities in Thai communities. The pantries require neither minimum nor maximum donations, as the idea of the pantries comes from only sharing small portions of leftover food in any household's kitchen that could be shared with others (Little Brick Group 2020).

Several scholars have realised that the pantries reflect the structural problems of social welfare and the social security system in Thailand (Ariyaprichya et al. 2020; Nattaya 2020). Although the campaign intended to help people who were economically affected by the pandemic, chaos still raged in the community: some groups of people tried to take excessive amounts of supplies out of the pantries. As a result, those people were seen as selfish. On the other hand, this problem remained only somewhat controversial. Some critics believed that donors should give without worrying about what recipients would take, which was more or less what they did.

The scramble for donated items from the pantries exposed social welfare problems in Thai society. This has been called 'the gleaning welfare system': people must mainly be responsible for themselves primarily, and the government would provide only partial assistance since it does not view social welfare as a system for achieving the equity of all citizens. Therefore, the burden of ensuring social security must be borne by the people, who consequently tried to collect as much of the donations as possible to survive, as they did not know whether there would be donations left if they came to the pantries the next day. Interestingly, many experts believe that such behaviour was displayed not only by the poor but by people of all socio-economic classes owing to inequality (Ariyaprichya et al. 2020).

Furthermore, scrambling for donations likely occurred most often in communities where resources were not distributed evenly and fairly and people did not believe that government aid mechanisms were effective enough (Ariyaprichya et al. 2020). Therefore, if the government had a mechanism that could assure that people would be able to live well at a basic level, these people would only need to worry about taking just enough donated items from the pantries for that day such that, if they needed more the following day, they could simply visit again to

pick up more items. Scrambling for donations might then be reduced. Otherwise, if they were unsure whether there would be enough donations the next day, they would naturally choose to stockpile. Hence, such behaviours might have derived from the structural social welfare problems that forced them to struggle for survival.

Moreover, the existence of the pantries also demonstrated the ability of people in communities to express their social responsibilities (Ariyapruhya et al. 2020). Many times, people chose not to follow society's rules because of their financial and social status. Whenever people were insecure, they were unable to exercise their social responsibility. Proper picking of donated items thus could not happen. In addition, this could occur in societies with high inequality, especially where the poor are deprived of social rights: whenever these people saw an opportunity to take advantage of donations, they would take it.

It must then be asked whether the happiness-sharing pantries were suitable for Thai society or for solving the problem of hunger for the poor in Thailand. Supporting one another is a common practice in Thai society, and the pantries were a means of solving the problems at hand in helping the needy. It has been observed, however, that the existence of pantries might not have been suitable for the Thai social structure. Even though there were still many pantries in Thailand by the end of 2020, people in communities had already reduced their interest considerably, which might have been because the campaign originated in the United States and European countries, where welfare systems were highly developed. In those contexts, the target groups of the pantries were homeless people or immigrants who did not have access to the social welfare system. In addition, the pantries did not facilitate interpersonal communication, which prevented donors and recipients from knowing each other, resulting in fear of lower social classes. Thai society became a society in which people wanted to help each other but did not help to achieve equality for the poor. It was only temporary help, which did not lead to any long-term solutions. More seriously, if people felt that the existence of the pantries could enable them to live in this kind of community, they would not fight for more important things like universal welfare. The participation of the government in solving problems, such as setting up cameras, arranging staff to guard the pantries, and instituting rules for taking things out of the pantries, led to an additional problem: preventing community learning because people participated as if they were being forced to comply. People became more organised owing to fear but did not learn new behaviours. The

government should instead be involved in other duties, such as making the welfare system more accessible. As for the care of the pantries, this should be left to the community.

The happiness-sharing pantries thus seemed to be another weapon to challenge not only the COVID-19 pandemic but also economic and social disparities in Thai communities.

Conclusion

The community-led food and happiness-sharing initiative in Thailand was a mechanism that charities and local communities ran in response to COVID-19. It started from five model pantries and increased in number, reaching more than 1,400 pantries in Thailand. This campaign worked because of the contributions of charities, local communities, and the government. The existence of the pantries, however, reflected structural problems of social welfare and the social security system in Thailand. Communities faced scrambles for food because of the uncertainty, unfairness, and inequality of the welfare system. Therefore, the campaign seemed to help the needy during the pandemic, but only for a limited period of time, as it did not solve the underlying problems of Thailand's social welfare structures.

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23. Being-in-common and food relief networks in Metro Manila, the Philippines

Tessa Maria Guazon

In this chapter, I reflect on mutual aid networks in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on food relief platforms that were mobilised in the early days of Metro Manila's lockdown in 2020. While mutual aid is commonly understood through the Filipino notion of *bayanihan* (helping each other in times of need), the COVID-19 pandemic shed light on new structures of aid, most of which were greatly bolstered by social media platforms. I explore new articulations of what is commonly understood as *bayanihan*, an often-romanticised aspect of Filipino identity that has been routinely deployed by the Philippine national government in its aid rhetoric during national emergencies. Crises result in altered ways of life. These resulting changes can be understood in the context of 'communities of sense', whereby a community 'recognises a contingent and non-essential manner of being together' (Hinderliter et al. 2009, p.2). This 'contingent being together' is often the outcome of events that, as Jacques Rancière (2009, p.31) has claimed, 'frame a being-in-common', a mode of togetherness or collectivity that is simultaneously palpable and political.

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected food and livelihood security in the Philippines, with daily wage earners the most gravely affected. To elucidate ways of being together, I refer to my experience with women who had served as partners on a research project on neighbourhoods in Metro Manila. Before the pandemic, our women partners relied on meagre earnings from odd jobs on the streets of Escolta and adjoining areas. Lockdown and ensuing curfews made it impossible for them to continue earning their keep. A faulty public health system, the slow roll-out of assistance from the national government, and a crackdown on citizen-led initiatives greatly hampered the provision of

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assistance and aid to the majority of Filipinos. Food relief networks, including community kitchens and community pantries, provided immediate relief to many in need. These initiatives ensured readily available assistance, and, because they were initiated at the grass roots, they were less burdened by bureaucratic processes.

The next paragraphs provide an overview of how the pandemic affected food supplies and aid provision in the Philippines in light of the national government's response to the public health crisis. These contextualise the necessity of citizen-led food relief initiatives. The latter part of the chapter draws heavily from participatory fieldwork for our neighbourhood research project. They reflect on how social ties and relations of togetherness are formed during situations of crisis.

COVID-19 cases in the Philippines surged in the early weeks of March 2021, with more than 5,000 active cases recorded daily (Department of Health 2021). A projection from OCTA Research suggested the numbers could rise to 11,000 new cases per day, which was an ominous sign for the economy (CNN Philippines 2021). Rising cases of COVID-19 infections posed a threat to people's sense of security, specifically with regard to their livelihoods and the provision of basic needs. In interviews aired on both television and radio in 2020, daily wage earners said they would rather leave their homes and brave the virus than die of hunger (Talabong and Gavilan 2020). The national government's task force, together with local government officials, swayed back and forth in the precarious dance of halting the rise of COVID-19 cases through movement restrictions and fully opening the economy to provide jobs.

Filipinos' sense of security was further threatened by the national government's response to the pandemic. The Philippines was placed under a longer lockdown than other countries in the region, rivalling even that of Wuhan province in China, where the first cases of COVID-19 were thought to have emerged. While the government was slow to close the Philippines' borders to travellers from nations with widespread outbreaks, it was quick to deploy its military and police forces to patrol the streets during lockdown. Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte declared a public health emergency on 8 March 2020, and a lockdown took effect in Metro Manila and the rest of the island of Luzon on 16 March. Metro Manila and cities across the archipelago were placed under varying degrees of quarantine: community quarantine, enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), and modified enhanced community quarantine (MECQ). A prolonged city-wide lockdown would inevitably cripple the economy, as it would hinder workers' ability to commute a long

distance to work. The so-called ‘granular’ or zone-specific lockdowns implemented in 2021 seemed ineffectual in stemming the rise of active COVID-19 cases.¹

With Proclamation No. 1021, Duterte declared the country would be under a year-long state of calamity from 13 September 2020 until 12 September 2021 (Aurelio 2020). According to the president, extending the state of calamity would ‘afford the national government as well as local government units ample latitude to continue utilising appropriate funds, including the quick response fund’ in their response to the public health crisis. The president was also granted special powers to reappropriation the 2020 national budget through the *Bayanihan to Heal as One Act*. The proposed 2021 budget of 4.5 trillion Philippine pesos was meant to bolster government response to the public health crisis (CNN Philippines 2021).

A lockdown of draconian proportions

The government’s response to the crisis was continuously marred by other equally worrying developments, including the misappropriation of funds by officials of the state-run health insurer Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth) (Luci-Atienza 2020); the non-renewal of the franchise and subsequent closure of the largest media company in the country, ABS-CBN (IFJ 2020); the continuing spate of activist killings and the arrest of citizens protesting the government’s feeble response to the pandemic; and restrictions imposed on individuals and local media critical of the government.² Filipinos grappled with the startling figures of rising COVID-19 cases in the country, the staggering loans the government amassed in 2020, and the great numbers of poor people who continued to face hunger during the pandemic.

Official statistics from 2018 placed poverty incidence in the Philippines at 16.7%, translating to 17,000,000 poor Filipinos (PSA 2020, p.ii). Furthermore, 12.1% of Filipino families did not have sufficient income to buy minimum basic needs, including both food and non-food needs (PSA 2020, p.ii). The National Capital Region (NCR) was recorded as having the lowest poverty incidence among families, while the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) had the highest poverty incidence. Secretary of Agriculture William Dar assured Filipinos there was adequate food supply until the end of 2021 despite restrictions on mobility (Miraflor 2021). The secretary remained overly optimistic, confident in his projection of a 2.5% growth rate even though the price of goods continued to soar.

The Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) on the COVID-19 pandemic also instituted a government programme focused on a national food policy, Zero Hunger 2021, led by cabinet secretary Karlo Nograles. The Philippines' National Food Policy was launched in October 2020.³ It endorsed a 'whole-of-nation' approach to eradicating hunger. The Department of Agriculture partnered with the IATF in bringing forward the key policies of the National Food Policy programme, including 'Agriculture 4.0', which aimed for a 'smarter and more efficient industry'. The Zero Hunger task force cites among its accomplishments the creation of the Enhanced Partnership Against Hunger and Poverty, the institutionalisation of the Zero Hunger programme guidelines, the airing of the webinar series *Kasapatan at Ugnayan ng Mamamayan sa Akmang Pagkain at Nutrisyon* (KUMAIN), the Feeding Programs Initiative for the First 1000 Days of Life, the launch of Pilipinas Kontra Gutom, and the draft of the proposed Philippine Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Project for the World Bank (Department of Education 2020).⁴ Despite government pronouncements and the recent institutionalisation of the National Food Policy programme, many Filipino families remained impoverished. Food prices continued to rise, with an estimated increase of 6.7% year-on-year as of February 2021, the highest recorded food inflation since December 2018 (Trading Economics 2021).

The pandemic also brought about an unprecedented loss of livelihoods, with informal workers and daily wage earners suffering greatly. The impact of the city-wide lockdown and the government's slow response to curbing COVID-19 cases and the provision of aid was strongly felt by millions of poor Filipinos. This situation was greatly reflected in the life situations of our women research partners in the Southeast Asia Neighbourhoods Network (SEANNET) project, who lived on the streets of Escolta, Manila, and whose struggles to make a living were magnified a thousandfold during the pandemic. I turn to their experiences in the following section.

Survival on the streets of Manila

Together with artists Alma Quinto and Nathalie Dagmang, I worked closely with our women partners on the Manila case study for the SEANNET research project. The Manila share of the project explored the links between art and urban development. We were keen to understand how arts and culture had been enfolded in urban redevelopment programmes and in processes of gentrification. We also wanted to

Figure 23.1. Escolta street party, revellers congregate in front of the historic First United Building, 2017



Source: Photograph by the author.

employ the methods and approaches of the visual arts to understand how processes of urban development marginalise and disenfranchise poor and itinerant communities. Often, art collectives, cultural projects, and residency programmes are benignly subsumed into gentrification processes, but there are also approaches that utilise the arts as a means for disadvantaged communities to be heard. We worked with a core group of six women who lived on the streets of Escolta. They were third- and fourth-generation street dwellers and made a living from informal jobs. We were interested to know how informal settlers adapted to changes in the urban fabric. The social ties these women developed with each other were instrumental to their survival on Manila's streets. We wanted to know how neighbourly attitudes helped them survive the hardships of life on the streets.

Escolta used to be a thriving commercial street, linking the River Pasig to both the walled city, Intramuros, and thriving Binondo, Manila's Chinatown. Manila flourished as a port city thanks to the galleon trade in the 17th and 18th centuries, and even then Escolta housed

warehouses and *bodegas* for commercial goods. Manila was heavily bombed under Japanese occupation in World War II, and Escolta fell into ruins. It had a brief revival in the 1950s and 1960s but became derelict by the 1970s, when the city of Manila was overshadowed by rising commercial districts elsewhere in Metro Manila, including Quezon City to the north and Makati to the south. The local government of Manila regarded Escolta as a crucial commercial development corridor. The late 1990s thus saw efforts to revitalise the area. There were campaigns to conserve and reuse historic buildings in the area. There were also plans in the early 2000s for Escolta to adopt a mixed-use development plan, which did not materialise. In the mid-2000s, Escolta and other areas in Metro Manila saw a revival through art and cultural events, trendy shops, hip coffee bars and restaurants, bazaars, and street parties. In Escolta, these events or happenings were centred on the historic First United Building, which housed spaces for creatives and start-up businesses, including 98B, an arts initiative that was at the forefront of these projects. These events attracted many visitors to Escolta, mostly young people who lived in other parts of sprawling Metro Manila.

Our women partners made a living by selling candies, instant noodles, and packed-for-retail food items. Two of them ferried passengers across Escolta, Quiapo, and Binondo in their pedicabs. Sol, a busker, also had a thriving makeshift store under a bank's awning, where she and her son had sheltered for years. Brenda and Susan made a living by selling fruits, drinks, and peanuts. These earnings were augmented by their partners' and children's wages. Escolta vendors relied heavily on their *suki*, or regular customers, for daily earnings, averaging between 150 and 300 Philippine pesos (around US\$3 or £2 to around US\$6 or £4) on a good day. We witnessed many transitions in their lives in the years we worked with them (i.e. 2017 to 2020). Two moved into rented spaces, which, though still makeshift, were a significant departure from living inside a pedicab or on the streets. One lost a child and found a new partner; another had her son's kidney stones surgically removed; and another's husband recovered from a lingering lung illness. They described their life on the streets as '*pamamangketa*', a means of survival and a manner of reciprocity that allowed them to live through everyday hardships. During our often-compelling sessions, they described the difficulties they faced every day, but they would always claim there was a way to live together and 'be in common': to be with another, to feel each other's pain, and to empathise with each other. They cited

attributes such as *'maabilidad'*, *'maparaan'*, and *'madiskarte'* (creative and resourceful), as well as *'magaling makisama'*, *'marunong makisama'*, *'may malasakit'* (to be able to relate well with one another, to feel for each other). These life skills entailed close observation, creativity, interdependence, and shared concern.

In the summer of 2018, we conducted a cookout and personal history workshop with our women partners. The workshop components, designed by artist Nathalie Dagmang, started with a trip to Divisoria Market to buy ingredients, followed by cooking together and sharing a meal with our women partners and their children. Our women partners were responsible for convening the participants and arranging our transportation to and from the market and the workshop venue. After our shared lunch, we had a personal history session where our women partners connected life events with historical and day-to-day events in Escolta and the adjoining areas of Quiapo and Binondo. It was interesting to note that the women emphatically mentioned how much they missed cooking their meals, which they could not do because they lived in the discreet spots and corners of Escolta Street. The ability to provide meals was a primary concern for our women partners.

Figure 23.2. Shared lunch during our structured cookout at a rented upper floor of a cafeteria in Escolta, May 2018



Source: Photograph by Eric Guazon.

Figure 23.3. Timeline workshop with our women partners, May 2018

Source: Photograph by Eric Guazon.

Restrictive pandemic policies

In March 2020, the Philippine National Police made 41,000 arrests for violations of enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) regulations (Castañeda 2020). The situation was widespread, with a host of informal workers and daily wage earners severely affected by the lockdown and curfews in Metro Manila. Fear and distrust of local police were prevalent among informal settler communities. Similar concerns often came up in discussions with our women partners: recollections of when belongings were carted off during raids; when children were brought by Department of Public Services personnel to holding centres like Boys Town; and how livelihoods were greatly dependent on illegal fees or *butaw*.

While the National Food Policy had been institutionalised and inaugurated, food provision and food security were matters not easily resolved by the government, especially during lockdown. On 1 April 2020, residents from Quezon City's Sitio San Roque, one of the Philippines' largest informal settlements, were violently dispersed, with 21 of the protesters arrested by city police.⁵ They demanded the immediate release of food aid from the local government (CNN Philippines

2020). Police, on the other hand, claimed residents had violated restrictions on public gatherings by staging a protest without a permit. Six jeepney drivers were likewise jailed on 2 June 2020 in Caloocan (Aspinwall 2020). They rallied for the renewed operation of jeepneys in Metro Manila and the immediate provision of aid by the government. Jeepney drivers lost their wages because of the prolonged suspension of public transportation during the lockdown. Several of them resorted to begging, imploring passers-by and private vehicles for donations (Aspinwall 2020).

Drawing from my own social media network and first-hand knowledge of food provision networks during quarantine in Metro Manila, I observed the development of initiatives like community kitchens (Sitio San Roque's Kusinang Bayan was one such example) and even the private efforts of chefs: Waya Araos-Wijangco of Gourmet Gypsy Art Cafe in Quezon City, for example, transformed her usually bustling kitchen into a food provision hub for frontline workers and drafted guidelines for community kitchens. Other initiatives included those of volunteer groups like Art Relief Mobile Kitchen, which had in the past cooked and provided food for communities affected by disasters. The lockdown gave rise to citizen initiatives propelled by social media, where public calls for contributions, donations, and volunteer work were fielded. They covered a vast array of needs: transportation and lodging for healthcare workers, food relief, direct purchase of produce from farmers, translating health advisories into local languages, and many more.

Artist Nathalie Dagmang reached out to our women partners in March 2020, a day after the lockdown was imposed in Metro Manila. Several of them replied with a sense of panic: the deserted streets meant they would not earn a cent in the coming days, even weeks. Empty streets only meant only one thing: little or to no earnings. Food aid was promised by the national government during the city-wide lockdown. Distribution was left to local barangays (the smallest political administrative units in the Philippines). Our women partners waited for their food packs to arrive, but they had to leave the barangay hall owing to the strict enforcement of curfew during quarantine. Dagmang and I rallied to raise funds for food relief through social media, primarily through a campaign launched by the civil society organisation People for Accountable Governance and Sustainable Action (PAGASA). Food survival packs cost 700 Philippine pesos (US\$15 USD or £11) and were meant to tide people over during the first few difficult weeks

Figure 23.4. Plastic chairs in front of a sari-sari store reserved for the arrival of food packs to be distributed by barangay officials, 2020



Source: Photograph by Veejay Villafranca.

of lockdown. Reflecting on her experience distributing the food packs, Dagmang (2020) noted numerous challenges to organising the relief drive, including arbitrary rules concerning checkpoints and curfews and, much later, local officials' requirement that the police or military transport and officially release donations and aid to communities outside Metro Manila.

Supplies of rice, vegetables, and canned goods were delivered to Nathalie at no cost and were brought to Escolta through the efforts of another volunteer. Our women partners helped distribute them. Dagmang (2020) noted that these efforts were carried out 'in the spirit of *bayanihan*', a local expression that refers to a communal spirit and the collective. Environmental historian Greg Bankoff (2020) has cited an even older understanding of *bayanihan* as arising from a 'rootless struggle with an environment where going it alone is dangerous'. How might we rethink the shared need to provide and sustain others during periods of crisis? How can we recuperate the notion of *bayanihan* when it has been deployed by the state in its aid efforts and co-opted in its insidious drive to curtail individual freedoms?

Conclusion: the need for a humane and participatory approach

The authoritarian nature of the Philippine government's policies only worsened the pandemic situation in the Philippines. The state's overtly militaristic approach resulted in arrests, discrimination, and confusion and did not in any way advance the ready provision of aid to those gravely affected by the pandemic. The proliferation of community pantries and community kitchens across the archipelago showed how mobilisations initiated by citizens were more effective in directly providing assistance.

There exists great potential in mobilising women like our research partners from Escolta to restructure food supply chains in cities. It was often the case that our women partners and their children, more than their partners or husbands, provided for their families. This supports the observation that women have always been 'actively involved in

Figure 23.5 and Figure 23.6. Distribution of food packs in Escolta, Manila



Sources: Photos by Richard Quan and Nathalie Dagmang, respectively.
Note: These were delivered through another intermediary.

food systems [yet] their contributions [are often] unrecognised and they face many inequities' (Zselezcky et al. 2020).

Our engagement with our women partners from Escolta helped us realise commonplace understandings of reciprocity and cooperation, specifically those shaped by daily struggles deeply rooted in the structural inequities that pervade life in contemporary cities not only in Southeast Asia but around the globe. Perhaps the vital life lessons we overlook and frequently ignore are those we need to learn again from people whose lives are in perpetual crisis. These lessons include the centrality of social ties in weathering crisis situations and thriving after the crisis has passed. In the Philippines, however, citizen-led initiatives were persecuted and received little support from the state. This was evident in the red-tagging of community organisers and the eventual co-optation of their initiatives and projects by local government units – and even by the military (Robertson 2021; Valenzuela 2021). In the context of pervasive repression, these citizen-led movements should instead take the lead.

Notes

1. Granular lockdowns meant that residents of specific barangays (the smallest political unit in the Philippines) were restricted from leaving their homes, which presented problems for access to food and livelihoods. Some local governments promised the delivery of food packs to affected households, but our experience from 2020 showed that these provisions arrived with great delay. On 19 March 2021, the Philippines recorded the highest count of active COVID-19 cases, at 7,103. 'Circuit-breaker lockdowns' were proposed by local government units instead of the more stringent 'general community quarantine' (GCQ).

2. Summary killings and arrests of activists in Manila and other regions continued. Nine activists were gunned down in the Calabarzon region on 7 March 2020, and many individuals, including lawyers and judges, continued to be 'red-tagged', i.e. accused of being affiliated with the Communist Party of the Philippines.

3. According to Nograles, the National Food Policy was geared towards six result areas: the review and rationalisation of existing policies, rules, and regulations related to zero hunger; ensuring available and affordable food; securing nutrition adequacy; securing food accessibility and safety; ensuring sustainable food systems, food resiliency, and stability; and ensuring information, education, awareness, and participation among the people.

4. The Department of Education endorsed the National Food Policy, as it supplemented the department's existing School-Based Feeding Program (SBFP).

The SBFP provides nutritious meals and milk to learners from kindergarten to Grade 6 whom they describe as ‘wasted and severely wasted’. KUMAIN is a consultative platform; it is roughly translated as Practice and Consultation among Citizens on Adequate Food Provision and Nutrition. Pilipinas Kontra Gutom means Philippines Against Hunger.

5. Sitio San Roque used to be home to 17,000 families, many of whom were migrant workers from the provinces. The government entered a joint venture with Ayala Land Corporation to develop the land they lived on. There were numerous demolitions in the area, with the most violent ones happening in 2010 and 2014. As of December 2018, only 6,000 families were left in Sitio San Roque.

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24. Community responses to gendered issues in Malaysia

Tengku Nur Qistina

The COVID-19 health crisis had a major impact on the world, disrupting the economy, politics, and social life, as well as gender relations. Indeed, COVID-19 exposed long-standing gender tensions and inequalities as the world has struggled to contain its spread.

This chapter examines how women were affected by COVID-19 in Malaysia following the implementation of its first movement control order (MCO), in the first year of Malaysia's version of a quarantine and lockdown. It focuses on the community's role in providing help and assistance to women during an unprecedented health crisis and a unique political shake-up in the country. The political background of the nation yielded a variety of government responses to the few incidents that occurred during the MCO, as voids and holes in the system became apparent following a change of government in early 2020.

This chapter also aims to focus on the community outreach that unfolded both online and offline, as Malaysians and various non-governmental organisations like the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), which works on domestic violence and advocates for a gendered perspective on social and political matters in Malaysia, rose to the occasion. The MCO also brought new, innovative efforts through online efforts that sought to fill the gaps left by governments and other established institutions as they scrambled to ramp up and pivot their capacities towards dealing with the pandemic. These non-governmental initiatives received a lot of attention and were effective in shaping policy, especially on matters related to domestic violence and women's burden of care.

The pandemic made it clear that community-based organisations and their efforts played a major role in sustaining communities during the MCO. The government was limited in its capacity to engage

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with Malaysian residents. Moving forward, the pandemic proved that community-based efforts in Malaysia need to be further empowered and strengthened to allow them to serve the nation and its residents where the government fails to do so.

First, this chapter looks into the most salient issues Malaysia faced during the pandemic, such as domestic violence and how Malaysia coped with its rise following the implementation of the MCO. Second, it describes the Malaysian political scene that changed drastically overnight at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic; this political climate influenced public perceptions of the government and its actions relevant to women and gender. Finally, this chapter explores the different ways in which community responses have filled in the gaps and voids left by the government and its agencies.

Domestic violence

Domestic violence was more prevalent than ever before during the stay-at-home measures introduced as part of the world's fight against COVID-19. The WAO in Malaysia recorded a staggering fourfold increase in the number of calls received compared to before the MCO was imposed (Bernama 2020). The increasing occurrence of domestic violence was observed globally, as UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a 'domestic violence ceasefire' when the pandemic first hit in 2020 (United Nations 2020). The secretary general also suggested that governments should take more proactive actions in supporting efforts to prevent domestic violence. An example of such support could be supporting civil society efforts and making investments in online services. To help monitor and manage the expected rise in gender-based violence following the pandemic, governments could declare shelters for domestic violence victims and survivors, provide essential services or set up emergency warning systems in pharmacies and grocery stores to increase the accessibility of services for victims (United Nations 2020).

The rise in reported cases of domestic violence was attributed to the stress brought on by lockdown measures. Increased anxiety from financial stress resulting from the concomitant economic crisis set the stage for a worsening domestic violence crisis (Peterman et al. 2020). Malaysia also recorded a rise in unemployment during the first year of the pandemic, defined as March to December 2020. In May 2020, Malaysia's unemployment rate rose to 5.3%, its highest point, with a total of 826,100 Malaysians unemployed (DOSM 2020). Studies in the

past have proven a causal link between economic hardships and a rise in domestic violence, especially between intimate partners (Schneider, Harknett, and McLanahan 2016). Rising unemployment numbers brought on by the pandemic thus definitely made domestic violence a cause for concern.

Physical distancing and quarantine measures introduced by government health officials to curb contagion also contributed to the increase in domestic violence (Campbell 2020). They made violence a coping mechanism, as perpetrators felt a loss of control over their lives (Peterman et al. 2020).

Part of this was due to reduced access to support systems, as lockdown and curfews confined victims to their homes, limited contact with persons outside their household, postponed court hearings or counselling services for domestic issues, and allowed perpetrators to more easily restrict victims' access to support hotlines and other services. Additionally, victims struggled to detach themselves and escape abuse due to the uncertainty the pandemic brought. Women might have opted to stay with abusive partners for a host of reasons that were exacerbated by the onset of the pandemic (Peterman et al. 2020).

In providing economic assistance, the Malaysian government first introduced an economic stimulus package called PRIHATIN, which directly translates into English as 'care', at the end of March 2020. Unfortunately, the PRIHATIN package lacked the ability to empower women, who were the most likely victims of domestic abuse: statistics obtained in 2019 showed that 91% victims of domestic abuse in Malaysia were female (Yuen and Chung 2019). The PRIHATIN package provided cash transfers aimed to instantly ease the burden on the community. However, they were given to the heads of households, 80% of whom were men (UNICEF 2020). The situation for women, meanwhile, worsened, as they were often left trapped in their homes and lacked the financial support to escape abuse (WAO 2020).

Fortunately, organisations like the WAO, Sisters in Islam, the Women's Centre for Change, and others included in the Joint Action Group in Gender Equality, a coalition of 13 women's rights organisations in Malaysia, were at the forefront of advocating and protecting women's interests, as they provided gendered perspectives on the pandemic. These organisations were especially active in both highlighting the challenges associated with domestic violence and providing various support services, from raising awareness of shelters for trapped women to advocating for better support and social protections for women (WAO 2020).

The lockdown measures that were introduced to curb the pandemic brought many things to light, including the role NGOs played in intervening in domestic violence in Malaysia. While Malaysia had developed its legal instruments to better protect victims of domestic violence through the Domestic Violence Act (Amendment) 2018, this was not extensive enough to provide victims with protection during the pandemic, as the political will behind such causes changed with the change in the Malaysian government in 2020. Building awareness in communities to collectively protect victims from domestic violence should be the first step in preventing the occurrence of domestic violence during a health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Politics and policies

At the height of COVID-19's first wave in early 2020, Malaysia went through a political crisis. The Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition was ousted after 21 months in power. As a result, the nation went through a change of government without holding a general election. The new government from March 2020 was that of the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, which until July 2020 included the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) – the party that had been in power from the nation's birth in 1963 until its electoral defeat in 2018. The PN government could be considered more right-wing than the previous PH government, which had a more progressive political stance on social issues, especially on those related to gender.

The change in government led to confusion in policies, a lack of coordination, and miscommunication, all of which resulted in backlash from communities. This may be attributed to the fact that Prime Minister Muhyiddin lacked political support in Parliament when the MCO was first implemented in March 2020 (Lee 2020).

The following incidents that occurred during the MCO called into question the PN government's gender sensitivity and awareness in the context of the lockdown.

1. Infographics

The first incident involved the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development's publication of a set of recommendations and infographics that aimed to advise women on the management of their households to maintain peace and harmony at home. The recommendations, however, which included imitating 'Doraemon voices' and giggling coyly, did not receive a positive response from the community

and led the ministry to remove them and issue an apology for their publication (Palansamy 2020). The All Women's Action Society (AWAM), an NGO, called the ministry out for its 'sexist' tips through a series of tweets that condemned the 'recommendations' (Palansamy 2020).

2. Crisis hotline suspension

Another incident was the temporary suspension of the government's crisis hotline, 'Talian Kasih' (*The Star* 2020). When the MCO was first implemented on 18 March 2020, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development announced that hotline would be suspended, as non-essential services in the country were suspended for an initial period of two weeks. The criticism this invited led to the suspension being reversed, as politicians from both the government and the opposition cited the dangers that quarantine measures posed for women, which made the availability of the crisis hotline even more important (Chin 2020).

3. Crisis hotline data

Data obtained from calls received through the crisis hotlines provided by the WAO reported a staggering 44% increase in domestic violence throughout the first month of the MCO (Heanglee 2020). Contrastingly, the government's crisis hotline recorded a different trend, as data published on the official government website recorded just a 'slight increase' in the occurrence of domestic violence in the country (Arumugam 2020).

While the data obtained from NGOs does not necessarily coincide with the government's data, this has less to do with the government's capability to provide aid. Instead, it is more reflective of the preference society has for engaging with NGOs rather than government officials, as engaging with NGOs can be less intimidating and confrontational (Sabanayagam 2020).

4. Burden of care

NGOs also shed light on women's burden of care. Women were unequally affected by the increasing burden of care during the MCO (Hisamudin 2020). As families observed quarantine, schools and day care were closed. Women were forced to juggle their responsibilities in taking care of their families, especially children and/or the elderly.

This was on top of the usual housework that women did, such as cooking and cleaning. Normally, domestic helpers that visit homes daily or weekly help lessen the burden of housework, but, with the imposition of quarantine orders, some families no longer had domestic helpers that could come daily, as movement was limited (Hisamudin 2020).

A 2019 report by the Khazanah Research Institute on women's unpaid work in Malaysia highlighted the burden women faced in the country. The report conducted a time use survey that highlighted gender disparities in relation to the burden of care in Malaysian society, as women had to shoulder more responsibilities than men while attending to professional life at the same time, hence the term 'double burden' (KRI 2019). This report highlighted the unequal burden imposed on women given the stereotypical expectations of women in fulfilling housework duties. The unequal burden was further shouldered by women during the pandemic, according to global reports (Thornton 2020).

NGOs highlighted women's problems nationally. Issues akin to women's burden of care had not been previously recognised, with little societal or national awareness. The efforts to highlight this can themselves be said to have resulted in the government's subsequent economic stimulus packages that aimed to address the need for childcare services, including the PENJANA economic stimulus package (Povera, Harun, and Yunus 2020).

The relationship between civil society and the new Malaysian government was responsive. This was seen as subsequent government economic stimulus packages like PENJANA incorporated gendered perspectives that could empower women and families. The PENJANA package was introduced during the country's recovery movement control order (RMCO) that began on 9 June 2020 (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia 2020). The newly unveiled economic stimulus package paid attention to women's role in driving the economy, with 50 million Malaysian ringgit (roughly US\$12 million) allocated for women entrepreneurs in micro-enterprises (Aziz and Zainul 2020). The burden of care faced by women was thus recognised, as childcare support services were provided in the new package. The government also allocated a total of RM200 million (roughly US\$50 million) for childcare services to encourage and support parents to return to work (Aziz and Zainul 2020). This was a positive response compared to the government's initial actions, which were shown by civil society to lack a focus on gender issues.

Conclusion

Malaysia's experience of handling the COVID-19 crisis coincided with several other historic political events in the country. The newly formed government's policies left much room for civil society and NGOs to step in and aid policies relating to domestic violence and other gendered issues. The events that unfolded in 2020 with COVID-19 demonstrated and emphasised the lack of gendered perspectives in Malaysian culture and the community at large. This situation signalled larger issues at hand that require the assistance and guidance of civil society and NGOs to ensure the needs of the people are met. To the government's credit, progress was made with subsequent policies like childcare subsidies and flexible work arrangements that were well received by NGOs and the community. The need for faster progress, however, merits exploration, as COVID-19 proved that slow and steady does not win the race when it comes to gender-related policies in Malaysia.

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25. Building rainbow community resilience among the queer community in Southeast Asia

Cornelius Hanung

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Southeast Asia, all state leaders in the region imposed measures to tackle the novel coronavirus. By the end of 2020, the measures taken had failed to recognise the intersectionality of the issues that exacerbated the pre-existing vulnerability of marginalised groups (FORUM-ASIA 2020). The queer community, which had been subjected to persistent discrimination and exclusion stemming from the embedded patriarchal, religious, and hetero- and cis-normative values within societies across the region, were among the groups most affected by the pandemic (Hanung 2020).

Queer communities in Southeast Asia faced various challenges and neglect by governments as well as the public on a daily basis owing to negative attitudes towards their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). The situation was perpetuated because no country in Southeast Asia has anti-discrimination provisions as part of their constitutions or national policies that specifically protect people with diverse SOGIESC (Outright Action International 2017). Furthermore, findings in Indonesia (Saputra 2020), Malaysia (Pillai 2020), and even the relatively more queer-friendly Philippines (Thoreson 2020) in early 2020 revealed a worsening trend of negative sentiments in the region, which blamed the queer community as the source of coronavirus and subjected them to degrading treatment under the pretext of reinforcing COVID-19-related protocols.

In the context of COVID-19, bias and negative attitudes from the governments of Southeast Asian countries resulted in the neglect of the pre-existing issues faced by queer communities, leading to their suffering from mounting physical health, mental health, psychosocial, and socio-economic challenges (Silverio 2020). To survive, queer communities

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in Southeast Asia had to rely on their own capacities to help each other. This chapter seeks to explore various strategies taken by queer communities across Southeast Asia to empower themselves and foster resilience in terms of economy, well-being, and advocacy during the first year of the pandemic.

Community-led initiatives in boosting queer economic resilience

Many queer individuals in Southeast Asia, due to fear of stigma and discrimination in workspace, have relied on jobs in the informal sector as their main source of income. When government measures for COVID-19 subsequently affected that sector, their living conditions worsened, as many of them could not access government assistance. In Thailand, for example, direct assistance provided by the government excluded those who worked in creative industries, nightclubs, and bars, as well as those who were engaged in sex work (Bohwongprasert 2020). In the Philippines, the relief package could only be obtained by people who were married and had families with children (Chong 2020).

As government interventions ignored the specific needs and conditions of queer people, various civil society and community-based organisations helped queer communities to survive by creating initiatives to alleviate the economic distress brought about by the pandemic. One example was the Give.Asia 2020 fundraising by Brave Space and Sayoni in Singapore, both of which were local organisations with specific focuses on empowering marginalised and queer women. The fund provided small grants to queer individuals who were struggling to support themselves and their family due to the loss of their jobs and income.

In Indonesia, communities of transgender women across the country conducted a series of local initiatives such as setting up food banks, distributing food to community members and other people in need, and providing cash assistance to cover rent payments in order to help alleviate the community members' economic burdens. They even enrolled as volunteers in their neighbourhoods to remind people about COVID-19 health protocols in public spaces (Rodriguez 2020).

To meet daily needs, queer and trans women who worked in the nightlife, bars, and sex work sector in Thailand decided to move to online platforms when the government ordered curfews and social distancing as part of its COVID-19 response. For example, they hired remote DJs to perform on Instagram Live and organised drag shows via Zoom. Although the efforts could not cover the full salaries of waiters,

bar staff, night taxi drivers, and other secondary jobs that relied on the industry, it at least helped queer-led entertainment businesses stay afloat in the absence of economic assistance during the first six months of the pandemic (Kenyon 2020).

Addressing psychosocial well-being through community-led support

Apart from economic resilience, social and emotional connectedness (both in-person and virtual) helped maintain queer individuals' psychosocial well-being and subsequently strengthened the resilience of queer communities (Anderson and Knee 2020). The isolation imposed by pandemic restrictions compounded existing psychological burdens, and it was further amplified by a heightened risk of discrimination and violence at the hands of their own family members and partners.

The earliest responses by queer community organisations to address the issue of social and emotional connectedness took place through online platforms. In the first three months after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, various virtual meetings – ranging from webinars and podcasts to community cyber spaces – were convened to discuss the effects of the pandemic on local queer communities in the region. These approaches, however, could not provide sustained and continuous support to facilitate total healing. Therefore, community-led initiatives were focused on providing peer support and counselling that could be accessed anytime by those in need. One of the examples of such a strategy was that implemented by Sayoni in Singapore, which cooperated with AWARE, a local women's organisation, to provide online peer support and a hotline for psychosocial counselling services that could be accessed by queer women in the country.

To support the well-being of caregivers who worked directly with the community, local queer community organisations also cooperated with think tanks, psychosocial institutions, and private donors to establish care programmes for caregivers. For example, the Community Health and Inclusion Association (CHIA), a community-based organisation for HIV-affected populations in Laos, cooperated with various agencies to support their workers by providing them with personal protection equipment, capacity-building for online communication skills, and regular counselling so that they could still conduct outreach to queer communities in need while maintaining their well-being (APCOM 2020).

Realising the paramount importance of providing mental health and psychosocial support for queer communities in pandemic times, community-based organisations and collectives also established online databases of service providers that were available and accessible for queer communities. Such databases were created by Youth Voices Count (YVC Secretariat 2020), an organisation dedicated to queer youth in Asia and the Pacific, and Queer Lapis, a queer community collective in Malaysia.

Although effective in terms of providing immediate support, it should be noted that online platforms had their limitations. As argued by Silverio (2020), there was the possibility that utilising online platforms for building connectedness was exclusionary, as they could only be accessed by communities in urban areas with the privilege of easy access to technology. Finding creative ways to reach the most marginalised of the already-marginalised queer community has yet to be explored.

Addressing stigma and discrimination in pandemic times

In addition to economic, social, and psychosocial supports, the risk of victimisation based on SOGIESC was one of the key determinants for building resilience among queer adults (Shilo, Antebi, and Mor 2014). This challenge was also prominent in the Southeast Asian context, as queer communities in the region remained disproportionately more vulnerable to prejudice or discrimination than their heterosexual or cisgender counterparts.

In commemorating the 2020 International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia, United Nations special rapporteurs on human rights warned the public about the imminent threat of queer victimisation and its effects on resilience during the pandemic (OHCHR 2020). The rapporteurs highlighted the increased frequency of hate speech explicitly or implicitly inciting violence against queer persons and blaming the pandemic on their existence. In Southeast Asia, the trend manifested in statements by government officials, political leaders, and religious leaders, as well as in discriminatory treatment and violence carried out by the public.

Many queer community organisations adopted three-step approaches to ensure human rights protections for queer communities. These steps entailed: (1) monitoring and documenting the pattern of violations experienced by the community; (2) providing responsive and restorative interventions to influence law and policy based on the recommendations

synthesised from the documentation; and (3) creating an enabling environment through coalition-building (Jaspars, O’Callaghan, and Stites 2008). The community had to take comprehensive steps to ensure the availability of judicial infrastructure and support for victims to obtain justice, even during the pandemic.

A notable example was provided by the Sangsan Anakot Yawachon Development Project, an organisation working to empower queer indigenous and stateless women in northern Thailand. As one of its responses to serve affected community members during the pandemic, it conducted monitoring and documentation on the impact of COVID-19 on women, children, and LGBTIQ youth in indigenous communities. The report was presented at subdistrict and national levels to influence policy interventions. The organisation also submitted the findings to the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, who later issued an official report on the impact of COVID-19 on the rights of indigenous peoples incorporating the voices of the Sangsan community (APWLD 2020).

Conclusion: lessons for moving forward

The examples discussed in this chapter show how queer communities across Southeast Asia, despite various degrees of pre-existing challenges, managed to survive by relying on community-led initiatives as the government’s responses failed to address their specific needs. It was not the first time that queer communities had been excluded from discussions related to emergency responses. In 2018, a coalition of civil society organisations in the Asia-Pacific region convened a groundbreaking meeting – ‘Pride in the Humanitarian System’ – to discuss the continuous exclusion of queer identities from humanitarian and disaster management responses. The organisations called for the inclusion of SOGIESC and the adoption of a feminist lens in recovery, relief, and rehabilitation efforts (UN Women 2018) to avoid further discrimination against the queer community. It was evident that governments in Southeast Asia failed to implement the recommendations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Queer communities in Southeast Asia demonstrated resilience by performing adaptive actions during the time of extreme adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker 2003). The success of such actions stemmed from the essential roles of civil society and community organisations. The cases of queer community-related programmes in Southeast Asia discussed

in this chapter show how local actors, who were well-equipped with the knowledge of economic, social, legal, and cultural dynamics, contribute to identifying the needs and developing the strength of queer communities, bolstering agency and self-organisation for queer communities to build resilience. Local actors proved themselves to be able to provide immediate, tailor-made solutions to alleviate burdens and reach out to those in need (Berkes and Ross 2012).

At the time of this chapter's publication, challenges remained. The first was sustainability. Building resilience is a continuous process to enable people to adapt during times of adversity. As there has been no certainty about the end of the pandemic or its re-emergence in the future, fostering resilience should also be accompanied by the availability of sustainable resources. Most of the community initiatives documented here depended on funding from civil society and private donations. There are huge risks associated with putting an additional burden on usually underfunded local organisations (Silverio 2020). This concern led 61 organisations and 142 activists across Southeast Asia to issue a statement calling on donors and funders operating in the region to focus more on building 'rainbow resilience' (ASEAN SOGIE Caucus 2020).

In addition to funding scarcity, civil society and community-based organisations faced a heightened risk of stigma and discrimination. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, pushed them to refocus their efforts on providing direct assistance to queer community members at the cost of reducing resources previously allocated for activities related to the promotion and protection of human rights. Many organisations thus conveyed concerns about juggling the two priorities.

The last challenge was how to plan for recovery. Most of the initiatives discussed above focused on the resilience of the queer community. At the time of publication, however, there was no definite plan for how to assist the queer community to fully recover from the pandemic in a sustainable manner. In October 2020, the governments of Southeast Asia adopted a regional framework of action to help the economic recovery of the region. Reflecting the continuous neglect of the needs of queer communities, the recovery plan did not specifically address the situation of these marginalised communities. With the recovery framework failing to address the specific challenges faced by the queer community, community-led interventions remained the only viable solution to alleviate the burdens on queer individuals and demand a more active role for governments during the recovery period in providing proper remedies for the community.

Figure 25.1. Civil society statement in Southeast Asia calling for donors and funders to focus more on building ‘rainbow resilience’



Source: ASEAN SOGIE Caucus.

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26. Postscript: in-pandemic academia, scholarly practices, and an ethics of care

Hyun Bang Shin, Yi Jin, Sin Yee Koh, Murray Mckenzie, Do Young Oh, and Yimin Zhao

As the world struggled to grasp the true scale of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, researchers and academics in higher education across the world suddenly found themselves plunging into an uncharted territory of isolation, online teaching, and a weakened boundary between home and work, if there was any such clear delineation before the pandemic. While the prevailing rhetoric was ‘we are all in this together’, such experiences were uneven across geographies and along the lines of gender, age, class, race, disabilities, and caring responsibilities.

With the deepening of the pandemic, the authors, located in different parts of the world (China, Malaysia, and the UK) and at diverse career stages, came together to share individual and collective experiences of the pandemic and reflect on some of the emergent literature that aims at contemplating the impact of the pandemic on society and academe. These moments of musing spanned such themes as mobility, knowledge production, ethics of care, and the future of academia.

This volume, *COVID-19 in Southeast Asia: Insights for a Post-pandemic World*, has brought together contributors who have all endured the pandemic-generated stress, angst, and discomfort in the context of an increasingly neo-liberalising academic environment. The contributors are also scholars whose research has been deeply rooted in Southeast Asia, a region that has much to offer to global scholarship in terms of decentring knowledge production in a world where Western scholarship has dominated.

As a way of concluding this volume, we share our own reflections on what it means to conduct academic practices during the pandemic and what the future holds for building a scholarly community that

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challenges extant power relations and advances an ethics of care as a norm. As scholars who are either based at or were trained in global North institutions, this chapter is also part of our self-reflection on our own positionalities.

Academic (im-)mobility and in-pandemic academia

As the world began to see a rapid increase in the number of COVID-19 cases, lockdowns eventually became the norm for many countries. Numerous media reports and scholarly works were produced to reflect on life under a ‘new normal’ that was said to have combined imposed physical immobility with the digitalised hypermobility of online activities (see Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring 2021). They have also called into question the sustainability of conventional forms of (capitalist) urbanism as a way of life.

While such experiences might have been the norm for many office workers, especially in the global North, many others were excluded from tapping into the new normal because of the inherently mobile nature of their jobs (e.g. delivery drivers, maintenance workers and operators of key infrastructure, and supermarket assistants). Pundits have also highlighted how informal workers in the global South have hardly remained locked down in order to provide services to those who were able to afford working from home. Insomuch as capitalism depends on the flow of goods and capital, it was inevitable that workers were driven to risk their well-being and lives in order to ensure that our physical infrastructure and facilities were attended to and the production of essential goods and food products continued (see Xiang 2020).

As much as the survival of our capitalist economies hinges upon the mobility of goods, capital, and labour, advancing academic careers has also depended increasingly on mobility that revolves around conference attendance, invited talks, field trips, study tours, networking, and workshops, to name only a few. For a long while, we have also been convinced that scholars throughout the world are largely members of an academic ‘imagined community’ (using Benedict Anderson’s term) that prioritised face-to-face communications with their remote peers, facilitated by the rapid development of global transportation, especially the aviation industry. Academic mobility is further influenced by one’s performance in relation to research outputs, grant applications, teaching, and service to their host institution (Lipton 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disturbed our routinised academic life. The global lockdown distanced most people in the world,

including researchers and their peers, their informants, and their co-operators in other places, adding substantial difficulties to continuing ongoing research projects and developing new ones. Moreover, many funding opportunities and academic positions became at risk of disappearing due to budget cuts in the aftermath of the pandemic (*Financial Times* 2021). Academics were unsure at the outset of the pandemic what impact universities' decisions to switch to online distance learning would produce. This seems a cliché as the internet has already penetrated deeply into academic and daily life, but, until recently, reluctance to use webinars or virtual conferences as a mode of their operation prevailed. How will the imagined academic community operate in the (post-)pandemic era, against an increasingly hostile environment and the haunting threat of coronavirus?

The fact that the academic community can be sustained online in such a less expensive and more environmentally friendly way discloses the extant inequity within the academic community. Traditional face-to-face communications, either in lectures or in conferences, and expensive databases and academic books have created many barriers within the imagined academic community. The circulation of knowledge and the interchange of ideas have thus been limited to several centres, even if these ideas and knowledge are of and for people and places afar. In this regard, a by-product of the technology we use is a more open, inclusive, and collective academic community, and perhaps the possibility of avoiding 'embracing the trap of neoliberal scholarship' (Corbera et al. 2020, p.6).

Here, we would like to posit initially that there might still be an upside to the in-pandemic academia. The pandemic unleashed the potential of virtual communications to become one of the major modes of academic interaction at an unprecedented scale. In most cases, with just a link, scholars around the globe, especially those who had not received sufficient financial support to fund long-distance travel, could participate in online lectures and webinars they were interested in and interact with their peers whenever they were available free of charge or at minimal cost. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many scholars became or were pushed to become experts of using virtual communication tools to deliver talks, attend conferences, meet their peers, and even conduct remote interviews or PhD vivas. We have now become adept at picking a nice picture to veil the messy background, as well as promoting our institutions or projects. Indeed, the threshold of engaging with academic activities was dramatically lowered. Digital video conferencing platforms enabled us to virtually meet, exchange ideas, and

continue our conversations by thinking and working collaboratively with much fewer concerns for financial pressure and overcoming the immobility and fixity generated by the pandemic.

Compared to physical travelling throughout the world, this is a vivid illustration of an academic version of what 30 years ago David Harvey (1989) called 'space-time compression'. The 'new normal' brought on by COVID-19 has shown the potential for positive developments in the academic community. For example, the Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science, with which the authors have been affiliated, hosted all of its research seminars and lectures online in the 2020–2021 academic year. At least a third of the audience came from Southeast Asia, while many speakers also came from the region without the barrier of travel costs. Digital technologies enabled scholars in different parts of the world to connect and support each other. The authors were able to stay in touch and have a series of regular, online face-to-face meetings to reflect on the pandemic and its impact on life and scholarship, which helped them to endure the hardship of the pandemic lockdown. This volume is also the result of such efforts to give more voice to scholars in Southeast Asia.

While the affordances of such online spaces might not have been equally accessed by all, they certainly helped create spaces of solidarity by transcending physical distances and other corporeal travel barriers that would have otherwise limited participation in in-person meetings. Researchers and academics located in the southern hemisphere and the global South usually find themselves unable to participate in events hosted in the northern hemisphere and the global North owing to unaffordable travel costs and sustained travel downtimes. From workshops to writing sessions, seminars to conferences, we were suddenly spoiled for choice as webinars flourished. It seems that scholars from the global South gained access to (more) seats at the table. Their voices started to be heard, and, hopefully, will be included in collective knowledge production moving forward, as has been the case in the production of this volume, which brought together contributors working in/on Southeast Asia.

Digital academe and its limits

While the new digital mode of scholarly exchanges might be a positive development towards a more inclusive and diverse academia, the 'new normal' under the pandemic produced experiences that were unevenly

shared depending on one's position and career stage. While experienced senior scholars were likely to continue to benefit from their established reputations, networks, and resources and practised hypermobility, early career researchers found themselves stuck in a myriad of online webinars, pixelated in gallery views on a screen that hardly allowed room for personal interactions that could help build or expand their nascent networks. Movement restrictions and tightened border controls for fear of the spread of the virus extinguished field trips, which would have been key to shaping new research projects, potentially leaving a lasting detrimental impact on those seeking tenure or promotion.

Furthermore, care and intentionality must be consciously considered and interweaved into such virtual meeting projects. In their reflections on pivoting an annual conference online, Goebel et al. (2020) have highlighted the need to consider the diverse needs of participants (e.g. from different career stages, income levels, and time zones) and the appropriateness of technologies in terms of inclusivity, privacy, and security. Most importantly, they have called for a reimagination of academic conferencing, for:

a new alternative that can address the problems related to geopolitics, continuing colonialism, the soft politics and power hierarchies in academic societies, and the alleged need for extensive and excessive physical mobility. (Goebel et al. 2020, p.813)

In other words, virtual platforms do offer the possibility of transcending some of the existing structures that prevent inclusive participation, but the broadening of participation alone is not enough. Conferences and workshops are key sites for building and growing networks that are crucial for future collaborations, career progression, and collective knowledge production. How might virtual (or new alternatives of) academic conferencing accord more inclusive and productive opportunities for networking that can overcome or reconfigure existing power hierarchies in academia? How might we extend, engage with, and practise care ethics (Lawson 2007) in the creation of new spaces of inclusive possibilities? These are some of the emergent questions that academe needs to address in the coming months and years.

Lastly, it is important to be aware that digital technologies also have a limit. While people in some countries have limited access or no access to video conferencing software, people in conflict zones have limited access to the internet itself. For example, access to the internet has been frequently restricted in Myanmar since the coup in February 2021. How

we can collaborate with and support the scholars in such challenging circumstances has become a major challenge for the rest. Furthermore, while many countries introduced technology-driven rapid responses to COVID-19 in order to keep the rate of new infections low and reduce mortality (see Sonn, Kang, and Choi 2020 for the experience of Asian states), the integration of previously disconnected private information altogether and the implementation of various online apps to monitor movements raises concerns for the emergence of digital censorship and surveillance enabled by state-led pandemic responses (see Amnesty International 2020). Several Asian states reportedly took advantage of COVID-19 to justify their controls over online information as well as suppression of dissent (Elemia 2021). More than 100 civil society groups signed a joint statement issued by Amnesty International (2020) to prevent surveillance overreach and safeguard human rights. In fear of the pandemic, people also opted into the digital surveillance led by the state (see, for example, Chok 2020 for the case of Singapore), a phenomenon that is not new to the pandemic world but builds on path-dependency (Chung, Xu, and Zhang 2020). The implication of all these is that the emergent digital opportunities are to be received with caution for heightened possibilities of digital censorship and surveillance that might also affect critical scholarship.

Hyper-productivity versus slow scholarship

The neo-liberal university had pushed us relentlessly, and the pandemic added salt to the wound. During the pandemic, our workloads increased tremendously, our personal spaces of rest and recuperation invaded and taken over by ever-expanding work that has crept into our lives and our homes. Burnout is rampant, affecting academics worldwide across all career stages (De Gruyter 2020; Gewin 2021; McMurtie 2020), and such hardship might have been felt more strongly among those with additional care responsibilities and health vulnerabilities. Where does work end? Does it end? Where and how do we draw boundaries? Can we afford to draw boundaries in the here and now, without unknowingly compromising our futures? Indeed, as Behrisch (2021, p.673) has reminded us, there is ‘an opportunity cost to caring [for the self and others], which is not rewarded within neoliberal culture’. As we pondered these questions, in our isolated bubbles that were somewhat out of sync with others who were in differing stages of lockdown, our place within in- and post-pandemic academia came to appear even more uncertain. Where and how do we go next?

Shock and uncertainty were among people's first experiences during the pandemic. They were accordingly shaping our problematics and practices of knowledge production. To do our best to capture the pandemic conditions and their effects, as well as to respond to situations of uncertainty, it would have been very tempting to write and disseminate 'knowledge' as quickly as possible. The dilemma between instant reaction and in-depth reflection is hence brought to the fore and is worth further interrogation. The World Health Organization, for instance, issued its interim guidance on strengthening urban preparedness for COVID-19 in early 2020, when the pandemic was just beginning to unfold (WHO 2020). While it aimed to guide local authorities across the world to take action, the document turned out to be an encompassing void – saying everything and hence nothing. Worse still, we also saw presumptions raised with no solid evidence. For example, it referred to 'the ease of introduction and spread of the virus' in densely populated areas (WHO 2020, p.4), amplifying a long-lasting stigma towards certain urban spaces and residents and testifying, to some extent, what McFarlane (2021, p.6) has termed '[a]n imaginary of *density-as-pathology*' (original emphasis).

The rush to fast production without adequate evidence is not limited to the policy sphere alone. Among the pages of academic journals, similarly, we also saw a quick rise of commentaries and short interventions tackling the conditions of the pandemic. While some of them were relevant and timely in contributing to the collective scholarly response to this pandemic, some others were by and large putting old wine into new bottles, expecting to get more attention or citation with the pandemic as a new buzzword (hashtag) even though little empirical evidence was collected or presented. All of these added fuel to the fire of academe's prevailing culture of hyper-productivity.

The expectation of hyper-productivity might not have been explicitly spelt out but nevertheless was implicitly felt and internalised by many in the neo-liberal university. The metrification of academic work, which continued uninterrupted during the pandemic, 'placed new demands on academics to perform productively and reinvent the self' (Lipton 2020, p.3). Even as some of us succeed in becoming more efficient and more productive, the gauges of 'excellence' are continually being recalibrated upwards. We have no choice but to try to keep up and catch up. The metrified outputs of academics' intellectual work – most notably their publications and grants – cannot be miraculously produced in thin air or through a cookie cutter assembly line. Uninterrupted periods of gestation for deep work and critical reflection are the necessary ingredients

for work that can deliver conceptual resonance across empirical contexts. But time and intellectual head space for cognitive processes were increasingly scarce luxuries for many of us during the pandemic. As De Gruyter's (2020, p.18) report on the impact of the pandemic on academics and academic publishing concluded,

the pandemic has, and continues to be, a time of great stress, insecurity and pressure. These are pressures that will cause career-defining damage that impacts the individual but will also have significant repercussions for scholarship, equality, diversity and research innovation.

The repercussions are either damagingly long working hours to maintain hyper-productivity, erasing time for recuperation and family life, or poorly baked outputs that are equally damaging.

As members of the academic community, we want to call for more ripe reflections and the need to keep a greater distance from such conduct, not least because it is an emerging form of the inflated commodification of knowledge production, inflected by various impact factors and rankings that have long haunted academia. Here, we summon debates on slow scholarship that emerged in the 2010s, well before the pandemic (Martel 2014; Mountz et al. 2015), combined with attention to collective resistance, careful work, and intentional collaboration (e.g. Jones and Whittle 2021; Shahjahan 2014; Wahab, Mehrotra and Myers 2021).

We have certainly been sympathetic to the tendency to respond quickly during the pandemic when so many lives were in danger; however, we see it equally necessary to study this pandemic state of emergency with deep reflection, always focusing on actually existing situations and attending to dialectical relations between instant reaction and in-depth reflection, which might eventually lead us to what David Harvey (2020) would call the 'collective response'. There is no given end to any form of knowledge production in/of the pandemic since the situation is always unsettled. What we should do is respond to ever-changing pandemic conditions collectively, use any convenient way to observe, dialogue, and write, and continue developing those lines of inquiry with colleagues near and far.

There are already plenty of good examples of this kind of knowledge production. Arundhati Roy (2020), for instance, has depicted the 'portal' through which this pandemic was put into play in India. This portal not only revealed the realpolitik at the time of her writing that shaped the Indian government's infamous response to the pandemic

a year later, but also explained how and how far this tragedy, though immediate, real, and epic, would not be new at all. ‘The tragedy is the wreckage of a train that has been careening down the track for years’, says Roy. These sentences were written in April 2020, and they still worked, even more so, in the spring of 2021, when such tragedies became much worse in the same country on the same ‘track’. Xiang Biao (2020), on the other hand, has shifted his focus to the social production and reproduction of (hyper-)mobility, endeavouring to explore what happens when global and national economies become hostages of mobility on the one hand, while such mobility is being disturbed by the pandemic on the other. Outside academia, intellectuals and writers of other kinds also worked in their own ways to record the here and now of the pandemic, works that are also worth our attention when documenting the knowledge production in/of the pandemic. The diary of Fang Fang (2020), a novelist living in Wuhan, could be a good case of this kind; both its contents and related controversy in China are artefacts of the pandemic that invite further analysis.

Decolonising scholarship

The imposed restrictions on mobility raise questions about extant practices of knowledge production and academic collaboration, calling for greater attention to new opportunities for decentring academic scholarship in a way that allows room for the growth and independence of local scholarship without subordination to the hegemony of the global North. Conventional international collaborations have been heavily influenced by funding regimes that position scholars in the global North as principal or co-investigators of large grants, while rendering scholars in field sites of the global South local collaborators who carry out data collection based on the prescribed research parameters by grant-holders. The pandemic-generated difficulties in international travel acted as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they might have aggravated the existing inequity in scholarship by reinforcing the positions of local scholars as data collectors. On the other hand, it might have opened up a new opportunity for local scholars to be able to participate in research projects on a more level playing field based on their superior local knowledge that cannot be stolen by occasionally ‘parachuting in’ grant-holders. It is the latter that we hope to see blossoming, responding to the emergent calls for decentring knowledge production and decolonising academia.

While the pandemic opened a door to new opportunities that connect scholars across geographies, there is still a challenge for academe to overcome the existing hierarchies that favour the scholarship of the global North. The pandemic environment raised the possibility of immediate hardship to be given priority over a longer-term imperative of building a horizontal network of scholarship to advance the decolonisation agenda in higher education. These issues demonstrate the enduring relevance of Massey's (2004) point, projected through the imperatives of postcolonial thought (e.g. Jazeel and McFarlane 2010; Raghuram, Madge, and Noxolo 2009), that the outward-looking politics of one's connectivity to geographically and professionally distant others is all too easily made secondary to more proximate and immediate concerns.

Amid the myriad personal and professional challenges that the pandemic entailed – challenges that reinforce the fact that being able to write and publish one's thoughts on responsibility already betrays some amount of privilege – the legacies of colonialism have been made readily apparent in the fact that many of the most well-resourced scholars writing on Southeast Asia and other parts of the global South are affiliated with Euro-American research institutions. It is also true, although to a lesser extent than one might expect, of published scholarship. Of the first 856 English-language articles that we collected on COVID-19 in the fields of development, human geography, planning, and urban studies, we found that 71.1% of their first authors are based at institutions in Europe, North America, or Australia and New Zealand. This is an improvement on the percentages of 95.0% and higher that were found in major geography journals by Jazeel (2019, pp.202–203) half a decade earlier.

Such challenges have served as an impetus for geographers' recently mounting efforts to supplement postcolonial and subaltern methodologies by engaging more concertedly with decoloniality and its challenge to the legacies of colonial power preserved in the dominance of the global university and its associated epistemes (see Radcliffe 2017). The epistemological basis for this agenda has been furnished largely by the modernity/(de)coloniality programme, a highlight of which is Mignolo's (2002) argument that coloniality's entanglement with modernity is manifest in the contemporary geopolitics of knowledge that grounds Western epistemology – even when entrained in critical, Marxian, and postcolonial theoretical interventions – in a 'spatial articulation of power' (p.60) that is ineluctably colonial in its disposition.

In this regard, and in light of the pandemic-generated constraints on mobility, we call for the rise of critical scholarship whose line of enquiries by locally embedded scholars starts from the locality where the concrete web of life unfolds and is in need of transformation. Such enquiries are to produce an informed understanding of the locality that is situated in the *interdependence* of all places, to be followed by the reinterpretation and intervention by the enquirers. While we see such practices as part of decentring and decolonising the production of knowledge by adopting ‘a pluralistic world view’ as a means to challenge the Western hegemony of scholarship, we are also mindful of how such approaches ‘may risk falling into the epistemological pitfall of liberal pluralistic thinking, and that a preoccupation with multiplying and pluralising references can potentially neutralise or bypass historical violence and structural hierarchies’ (Hae and Song 2019, p.111).

Therefore, it is important to exercise inter-referencing within Asia (and, for this volume, Southeast Asia in particular) in a way that does not entail the erection of another *methodological regionalism*. This entails the recognition of ‘linguistic fluidity’ (Chen 2010; see also Zhao 2020), which produces a diverse range of translated versions of a concept born out of the experience of the Western modernity. Such fluidity is an indication of how political cultures in (Southeast) Asia can be diverse and differentiated from the West. We ask for more active contributions of locally based scholars who work in and on Southeast Asia, embedded in a horizontal network of scholars across the world, so that pandemic-generated (im-)mobility becomes not a testimony of isolated and individualised regional scholars but an opportunity to rebuild a new network of researchers equipped with decolonising imperatives that contribute to the demolition of existing hierarchies of scholarship. We hope that the co-authorship of this chapter is a small step towards this rebuilding.

Coda: ethics of care

Throughout the pandemic’s unpredictable course, surviving and withstanding its threats very much depended on the deepened feelings of care and compassion that COVID-19 motivated. It is this ethics of care to which we turn as we conclude this chapter, for, while a ‘resurgence of reciprocity’ (Springer 2020, p.112) in the form of mutual aid during COVID-19 provided much that is of interest to the critical social sciences – as is readily apparent in the pages of this book – it also imparted a renewed salience to the question of the social and political

responsibilities that are attendant on the production of geographical knowledge (Massey 2004).

For many scholars, the pandemic renewed the challenge of what Massey (2004, pp.8–9) has called ‘a hegemonic geography of care and responsibility’: a geography that privileges the near over the far and that manifests in distinctly territorial forms. As Massey has acknowledged, there are many reasons for this geography’s persistence. Those most apparent for scholars during COVID-19 included the disproportionate burdens of childcare and other domestic responsibilities placed on many academic mothers (Minello, Martucci, and Manzo 2020) and the anxieties of job insecurity and poor working conditions that preoccupied many early career academics (Kinikoğlu and Can 2020). Broadly, as Corbera et al. (2020) have argued, the pandemic highlighted the dearth of care, pluralism, solidarity, and well-being in normal academic practices, for which the pursuit of various standards of professional ‘excellence’ is often the overriding and unrelenting motive.

The aim of our knowledge production should not be the total number of downloads or citations but instead an ethics of care (Corbera et al. 2020) – the conduct of being collaborative in developing this collective response, we would say, is in itself a form of care and a critical part of the new ethics (see also Shin 2021, pp.67–68). The authors of this chapter have certainly benefited from the regular online meetings we held in 2020, which helped us to form a collective response to a collective dilemma of pandemic constraints without having to feel the urge of rushing into hypermobility and hyper-productivity. Our collective endeavour has also made us realise the importance of maintaining a horizontal network of scholars to overcome an increasingly hostile work environment in higher education and of establishing practices of knowledge production as an exercise that is collaborative, with the pandemic producing new inter-connectivities across great distances, and perhaps even that is therapeutic (in the sense of helping cope with distressing times). Ultimately, we hope an ethics of care becomes the foundation of critical scholarship that is not only confined to the space of the pandemic but a general practice in academia.

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